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Kristine Danowski

Maria Gavelis

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John Farrell

Steve Patten

Jennifer Boles

Advertising

Mary Perry

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For the Good of the Children

In the Boston Public Schools, a child who brings a firearm to school for the second time can be expelled for it. This might seem unwarranted interference with a student's right to bear arms, but the administrators made this rule for the students' own good. Everything human beings do for children is for their own good.

Consider the R. J. Reynolds company, which loves children so much that it has designed marketing specifically for them. R. J. Reynolds doesn't want children using just *any* cigarettes; it wants to make sure they use the right cigarettes. Philip Morris captured most of the children's market in the early 1980s by placing its Marlboro brand and logo throughout the movie *Superman*. Knowing a creative approach was needed, R. J. Reynolds began advertising its brand, Camels, with a cartoon character. The campaign has been remarkably successful. Recent studies show that American children recognize Joe Camel as readily as they recognize Mickey Mouse.

Today, R. J. Reynolds reaches a much younger age group with Joe Camel than Philip Morris did with Superman and has considerably extended its influence over American childhood. (The goal among cigarette companies is to gain cradle-to-grave brand loyalty. Their final marketing frontier is at the extremes of their customers' lives: the first two years of life, when the customer is too young to be trusted with matches, and the last two, when he is confined to an oxygen tent.)

Human beings have always been generous in their protection and care of their children. In the year 1212, Europeans released many of their children from their jobs on farms and in cottage in-

dustries to participate in something called the Children's Crusade. In this project, the children were sent to recapture the Holy Land. (I don't know exactly what a Holy Land is, but apparently the adherents of two contemporary religions each laid claim to it. The territorial dispute was only the nominal reason for the fighting. As is usual in these cases, the followers of the two religions were killing each other to convince themselves of their religious differences. Don't ask me what the differences were. One religious human being looks pretty much like another to me.)

Thousands of children joined the expedition to this Holy Land, and they marched through Europe to the port of Marseilles. The plan ran into some difficulty in Marseilles. Hugh the Iron and William of Posqueres, who provided transportation to Jerusalem, forgot about the crusade part and took the children to Africa, where they sold them into slavery.

Such occasional mistakes to the contrary, human beings care for children every bit as well as they care for any other capital asset. And why not? Today, nearly 800 years after the Children's Crusade, factories and farms throughout the developing world provide gainful employment to children, with workdays ranging from 12 to 18 hours. A child can usually begin to generate income for its owner by age four, which isn't a bad rollout, considering how low the initial investment is. Those who cash their children out, like Hugh the Iron and William of Posqueres, are the exception rather than the rule.

In the more prosperous regions of human settlement, they are hardly ever cashed out. And in this so-called developed world,



political stability, prosperity, and medical science have inadvertently conspired to increase their survival rate as well. In the United States over the past 30 years, the death rate of human beings under 14 has declined more than 62 percent — from 5,691 per 100,000 to 2,152 per 100,000.

Extending a child's lifespan extends the period that adults must care for it. This has lately led to broad experimentation in child care techniques: locking the children in closets, sexually assaulting them, starving them, beating them, chaining them to radiators. The incidence of these kinds of activities has more or less doubled in the United States (from 21.6 to 41.0 per 1,000 of population) between 1980 and 1986. It's a tough world out there, and the more generous adults feel it is their responsibility to strengthen the children for it.

The authorities of the Boston Public Schools hope that children who survive their education there will be as tough as any who have worked dawn to dusk on a Third World farm or spent their days chained to radiators. Allowing the children to bring their guns once makes sure that most of the student body has the opportunity to be exposed to guns. Of course, a child can be shot as easily by someone bringing a gun to school for the first time as by one bringing it the second time. But a child being shot now and again is the price you pay to teach the rest of them to dodge well. That way, they live a little longer. And smoke more Camels. □

June 14, 1959

By Wendy Wheeler

Art by Peggy Ranson

Lottie sits in the sandbox her dad made from the pieces of her Donald Duck swimming pool, one leg tucked under her and her chin on the knee of the other leg. She puts the tip of her braid in her mouth, liking the familiar taste of sweat and shampoo.

The summer sun strokes the back of her neck like a warm hand. The sand feels cool and gritty beneath her. It is naptime, but she has sneaked out of the refrigerated air in the house, leaving her little brother Jimmy asleep on his small cot, dark eyelashes fluttering with some dream. Lottie knows that, on the days when her mother starts her Little Tipple before lunch, she can safely escape. And she had, lying in bed in her white panties only until she heard the rasp of her mother's snores before slipping back into her play shorts and the yellow shirt with Howdy Doody on the pocket.

Around her is a tiny swamp she created as a home for her dinosaurs. Lottie has made mountains and ridges for them, pushing bits of seashell and stone into the sand to make it seem more like dinosaur times. Buried deep inside the sand bank she's just made is the biggest dinosaur, the one with hands like people hands and sharp, ferocious teeth. As long as it sleeps inside there, the other dinosaurs can feel safe.

She pats the sand she's just wet with water from the cat's dish, then brushes more sand from the bandage on her arm. She's not supposed to get the bandage wet or dirty, but she picks at the edges of it, curious about what lies beneath. Stitches, she knows, pieces of thread through her skin.

She'd watched as the doctor put them there in his cold and glittering office, her father, hat in his hand, standing at the head of the table in case she pulled away or cried. But Lottie hadn't cried. Dr. Bailey talked the whole time to her in a quiet voice, his hands gentle even when he gave her the shot that made the pain go away. Her father didn't say much of anything, but then he never did. Lottie saw the sweat shiny on his forehead though, there in the brightness of the doctor's office.

"Tell me again how this happened," Dr. Bailey had said.

"My mommy —"

"She cut herself on the edge of her wagon," her father said before she could finish. Then Lottie knew this was one of those times when you tell The Story of What Really Happened. She'd gone icy with shame over almost telling the doctor the truth.

Lottie bends forward now in the plastic pool that had been sliced so thoroughly it can never again hold water, no matter how much gray duct tape her father layers over the ragged cuts. She reaches one finger to the smooth sand bank she has created and, in the alphabet she has only begun to learn, scratches the letters L-O-T-T-I-E.

Darrin leaned over Carlotta's shoulder, his breath fetid with the cigarette he'd just smoked. "What's this, then?" he said, tapping the print-outs on her desk. "You're supposed to be prepping for the next temporal intervention."

Carlotta hastily hid the algorithms beneath a stack of papers. "Another project. And get the hell away from me. I don't need you breathing down my neck."

Darrin's dark eyebrows took an even more sardonic slant. "No, you never did like that position, did you?" He ran a quick finger down the inside of her arm, where the old scar from the wagon cut was a white line against the brown of her skin. It was one of the few memories she'd retained from the fog of her childhood. Only that and the other events of the past tied to a present-day condition — the burn marks on her chest, the missing tip of her little finger. She'd been told she'd had an accident-prone childhood.

Carlotta jerked her arm away, then rolled her chair out of his reach. Darrin pursed his lips, then said, "I can't believe you're going to live this Ice Queen role all your life, Carlotta."

"What do you know about it?" she snapped. Normally she could've ignored Darrin's imploring, but today was different. She could feel the adrenaline pumping through her. She rolled her chair to the patch of sunlight that came through the one window, letting the warmth calm her heart a little. That window, that sunlight, was why she'd chosen a smaller office, though her position as Senior Researcher entitled her to much grander digs. "I imagine you came to tell me which position I'm running today," she said. She buckled the timefield regulator around her wrist where it looked for all the world like an ordinary digital watch.

"Savini goes first, you second. You'll get the two-hour progression."

"Good." That meant she did have time for a side

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trip on her run. The timefield regulator, a device created largely from Carlotta's own theories and calculations, created a field large enough for only one person, and, because of the power required, they were allowed only three runs per event. The first run always went to Savini, the director of the Center. Because of the telescoping nature of the temporal progressions, each of the three positions was half the length of the preceding one. Savini would get four hours, Carlotta her two hours, and some other avid researcher would be allotted the one-hour run.

Darrin turned off her CPU as she rose. "I just picked up on something I'll bet you already noticed," he said. "In this run, you have to cut through a modern timeline."

"Oh yeah?" said Carlotta, her heart beating fast again.

"Yeah." He watched her too keenly with those dark hooded eyes of his. Why had she ever let him get close to her? "A summer day in 1959. You were how old then?"

Carlotta shrugged. "About five, I guess." She walked to the door, motioning Darrin through. She paused at the doorway, trying to see her office with new eyes. For the first time she noticed the austerity of it, the lack of toys and gadgets the other researchers seemed to have. Her walls were chock-a-block with diplomas, certificates, awards, but no photographs. No people anywhere. If history changed for her after she did what she was considering — and it might, she had to admit — would she come back to this same office? She turned out the lights and locked the door on the darkness.

"You going to want the usual warning calls?" Darrin asked as they made their way down the fuchsia and dark green halls of the Center for Advanced Temporal Studies. Darrin had acted as Carlotta's anchoring partner for all three of her previous runs. It was he who had come up with the idea of reminder calls. Several times those sub-audible chimes had been all that saved Carlotta from disappearing into the troubling gray fugue that seemed to surround only her during her time travel. They'd only just begun these trial runs, trying to get as many in as possible before the technology became public knowledge. It disturbed Carlotta that she, of all people, should be having problems. She, the one most familiar with the algorithms, the theories, the processes involved in the regulator.

"Just for the second half of the run," she told Darrin. "Send a reminder every fifteen minutes. But give me some peace for the first half." They entered an office, closed the door, and Carlotta slotted her badge into the security reader on the unmanned desk. A section of wall rolled back to reveal an elevator, and they stepped in.

Darrin was clenching his jaw. "Carlotta," he said after a moment. "I guess I've been as close to you as anybody, so if anyone should ask you this, then it's me." He turned to face her. "Are you planning something stupid?"

She gave him the look she'd used all her life to keep herself apart and safe, the look she'd given dozens of giggling schoolmates and gauche young men and fawning co-workers. Darrin didn't flinch, but his eyelids flickered. "How dare you question me?" she said.

The elevator opened. "Fine," said Darrin. He made a dismissing gesture with his hands and went to his place at the second control board. The other two anchoring partners were already at their boards. Behind them, one entire wall was taken up by the cycle regulator, a patchwork of matte steel and shining titanium. The prototype device didn't have to look good, just work correctly.

Savini stood at one of the tables, making notes in his vette book. He was a short man, dark hair thin on his head and thick above the top of his white collar. Savini had a theory that white was the most ubiquitous color to be found in the past. Carlotta usually kept to her fuchsia or green CATS coveralls.

"Did you come up with any theories about your memory lapse on that last intervention?" Savini asked Carlotta, something like a smile on his thin lips.

They'd discovered that during a run a traveler's memories of present time grew dim. In a kind of correspondence to this, the other researchers spoke of how incredibly vivid their memories of childhood became, surmising that it was just a part of some sort of neuronal balancing.

But it was actually more than that, Carlotta knew. Those memories acted as an anchor. And Carlotta, with her lost childhood, had nothing to secure her. The last time she'd traveled, she'd had a total amnesiac break. In the middle of taking a pre-Jurassic lichen sample she had simply forgotten who and where she was. She'd wandered along the red ocher cliff walls until the warning buzz of the device on her wrist had jogged her memory. Upon returning, she'd conscientiously logged the episode into her vette book.

Savini must have read that entry, hence the question. Unspoken in his question was the threat to bar her from further temporal experiments.

Carlotta took a breath. She wasn't about to share her theory with him, to let him know she was flawed. "I've adjusted the frequencies on my field generator," she said. "I think it was just a miscalculation." Savini snorted and turned away.

She *was* flawed. Carlotta thought about what she'd learned from the psychiatrist — the first one she'd ever gone to — just this week. How when Carlotta was unable to answer simple questions

about her early life, the doctor had sent her to a hypno-therapist. How, even after two sessions, that block between her and her memories remained an impregnable gray wall.

Carlotta saw her hands trembling as she flicked AB switches and checked readings on flat panels. The tension was doing something painful to her chest. Savini suspected her of ambitions toward his directorship, but the man was paranoid. All Carlotta wanted was to continue her work. Her work was her whole life, she'd realized. She had nothing else, nothing else at all to fill her time.

Reclaiming her childhood had to succeed.

Lottie hears footsteps on the caliche driveway. She looks up from the word she's just spelled in the sandbox, expecting to see her mother, furious and rumped at waking from her nap to find Lottie missing.

But this is another lady with brown eyes very much like Lottie's mother's, but different somehow. Her dark hair is straight and cut short like a Chinese doll's, and she wears something that looks like a purple romper with scarves tied around the neck. She puts her hand on the gate of the cyclone fence, and Lottie sees that her nails are short and bitten off.

The lady is looking around the yard, at the brick barbecue pit that had had to be pulled apart when Lottie's little brother got stuck in the chimney, at the toys scattered in the high grass, at the paint peeling away on the side of the garage, at the tree branches waving overhead. Her face is squinty like she's trying hard to think. She sees Lottie and her face changes. Her dark eyes get bigger and she bites her lip.

"Lottie?" she says in a funny tight voice.

"You better not come in this yard." Lottie says, trying to make her voice sound older. "My daddy doesn't let strangers in our yard."

The lady blinks and takes her hand away from the gate. "Why, you —" Then she laughs. "I know your daddy, Lottie, and your mother too. I just came by to, to see how things are." Her eyes travel back over the yard. "And this is how they were — are. Oh, my." She has her hand on her heart. She pants like she's been running hard. "My, my."

Lottie is still sitting up on her knees. "My mommy is taking a nap," she says. "She gets mad if anyone wakes her up."

"Well, let's not wake her up." The lady checks the odd-looking watch on her wrist, then opens the gate and comes in. "I'll just talk to you. You can call me Carlotta."

Lottie's mouth drops open. "Uh-uh. That's my name."

The lady smiles. "It's my name, too. Two people can share a name. It — it makes us special friends

in a way." She sits on one of the rusty metal chairs near the sandbox.

Lottie considers this. "Okay, then. You can use Carlotta and I'll use Lottie. Nobody but Granny Ed calls me Carlotta anyway."

Carlotta has been looking up at the tree branches again, pulling the tip of her brown hair into her mouth. But at Lottie's words, Carlotta turns back to her. "Oh, Grandma. How is she? Does she have her, her cat? Boots? Is Boots still alive?"

Lottie nods. "I hate that old cat. He scratches me every time we go visit." She smells Carlotta's perfume on the summer air. It is much nicer than the perfume Lottie's mother uses to cover the smell of her Little Tipple.

"That bandage," Carlotta says. "You cut your arm just the other day, didn't you? Cut yourself on a wagon."

"Yes ma'am," Lottie says, but has a tiny shiver of chill. She traces the spiral of the piece of shell in her hand. "The wagon did it."

Carlotta looks at Lottie's shell. Her face looks funny, almost like she's telling a secret. "You want to know something about that shell?" She takes it from Lottie. "A nautilus makes a spiral tube when you can see it from all three sides. But cut in half like this, it looks like little chambers leading to bigger chambers, leading to bigger chambers. You're too young to understand now, but someday you'll learn the theories. Because guess what?"

"What?"

"Time is a spiral too, but in four dimensions. And when you move through the spiral, you go through chambers just like in this shell. Isn't that fun to think about?"

"Uh-huh," Lottie says. She has noticed this shell before and the way sunflower seeds grow in a spiral and how the sound of a dripping faucet often has a certain rhythm to it. "How come you know about this?" she asks.

"It's my work."

"Oh." No grownup has ever talked like this about things Lottie is interested in. "I like yours work." She thinks of the scary dinosaur buried beneath the sand. "Do you have a little girl of your own?"

"No. No children, no husband, no — nothing." Carlotta is slouching in the rusty chair, her head resting on the chair back. She looks like she's thinking real hard, but her eyes watch the tree branches. "You jump from this tree, don't you?" she says a few moments later in a surprised voice. "I can't believe we did that; it's so high. That limb's ten feet up."

"It's the Bonz-away game. You have to jump from high and yell Bonz-away." Lottie likes the game. She likes how fast the ground rushes up at her. She likes the solid thump she makes when the ground hits her. She's crawled up to even higher branches sometimes and looked down, thinking maybe if she

jumped from there she'd get to see Dr. Bailey again, and he would talk to her with his nice voice.

Sometimes at night, especially when the screaming is bad, she thinks about the What-If Bonz-Away game. What if one day she threw herself at the ground, but she didn't fall? What if she hovered there in the air not touching anything? And then what if she started to fly, up as high as the trees? High as the roofs? High as the clouds, right up to the sun, so she couldn't even hear her mother screaming, couldn't see the house, wouldn't ever have to go back.

"Bonz-Away?" Carlotta puts both hands to her eyes, then begins to laugh like she's gasping. "The flying game. Oh." She takes her hands away and Lottie sees her eyes are red and wet. "Because someday maybe you'll be able to fly away from all this. Oh." Suddenly she drops to her knees and puts her fingers along the side of the ruined pool. "This tape. I remember now. I remember. The swimming pool got all cut up. Daddy said to say it was a neighbor kid, but it wasn't. It was — it was —"

"Mommy," Lottie whispers. It is so cold now she shivers and shivers. "I spilled Ovaltine on the kitchen floor. So she opened the drawer and got out the big knife and cut it and cut it."

Carlotta sits on warm ground, her cheek against the plastic of the ravaged swimming pool, tears flowing down her face.

This was a mistake, a terrible mistake. She'd only wanted to reclaim her childhood memories. But now she realizes why her past had remained a gray fog. It is flooding back to her now, all the violence of it, the screaming, the pain, the shame, the lies her father made her tell, the absolute fear that her mother would kill her someday.

"I was just trying to make her stop ripping my pool," Carlotta sobs. Her heart feels like it is exploding in her chest; her throat is raw with tears.

Now she remembers that whole evening: her mother baring her teeth as she hacked at the plastic, Carlotta pulling at her mother's neck until her mother turned to her, eyes wide and flat. Carlotta remembers the pain flashing like a hot tongue down her forearm, how her dad came home from work soon after to find her wrapped with a bloody towel. "My mommy cut me with her knife. She hurt me. My mommy —"

"My mommy hurt me too," says Lottie. Lottie props her arm along the frame of the pool and leans over confidingly. "Don't cry. See where this bandage is? There's stitches under there."

Carlotta sits up, hugging herself. She continues to have a hard time believing this thin little girl, with her messy braid, her defiant chin, and the hollow circles under her eyes, is her. But it is, it was.

Carlotta tries to smile. Her heart pains her with

every breath. "I'll bet you were brave when the doctor stitched you up." Her regulator tells her she has a half-hour to go before she must return to the split-off point. She begins to wipe the tears from her face, her mind spinning with all she has remembered. The knowledge she may have compromised her own timeline is only a small twinge of guilt; she hasn't really changed anything.

Lottie nods and pours sand over a pink dinosaur. "I was brave. My daddy was there. It's easier to be brave when he's there."

"Oh." Even to Carlotta, the word sounds more like a moan.

"What?" Lottie cocks her head at Carlotta, pink plastic shovel poised.

"You — your daddy." Should she tell Lottie this? What good will it do if it's going to happen anyway? But the words spill out of her. "Let's make up stories, okay? Like, maybe your daddy will get real mad at your mom for cutting you like this, only you won't know that's why he's mad until he tells you years later. Because maybe, maybe it's easier for him to act like nothing's wrong. And if one day your daddy left and got another wife and some other kids, then you shouldn't think he doesn't love you anymore. And if your momma was to get worse, well, it's okay if you tell some people about it. You're such a good kid, such a smart kid, you shouldn't think it's your fault."

She can't, just cannot, tell Lottie about the psychotic breaks to come, the savage bath in lighter fluid, the day her mother will purposely shut the car door on Lottie's hand. Jimmy won't even survive their childhood; he'll suicide on drugs at age fifteen. Lottie will feel responsible for this as she did for everything. She'll use her science scholarship to get away, will concentrate on her education, her research, her career. With each year of her adult life, her childhood will grow vaguer and vaguer, but she'll never marry, never form close friendships, never trust anyone ever, ever.

"But it's not your fault, honey," Carlotta sobs. "You're a great kid, a smart kid. Try not to let it hurt you, try not to let it make you hide away." She leans into the pool and takes Lottie into her arms. The little girl's body is amazingly strong. That's how we survived, thinks Carlotta.

Lottie hugs her back, thin arms around Carlotta's neck. "I don't want my daddy to leave," she whispers.

Carlotta sighs. "You wouldn't be able to stop him. You can't stop any of it. Some stories are just sad ones." She lets Lottie go, wipes sand from her chin. Lottie's dark eyes on her are huge and confused. Now Carlotta can see beyond the defiance in the chin to the immense pain in the child's face. "I — I've got to go, Lottie. I'll be in trouble if I stay any longer. Will you promise me you'll try to be strong?"

Promise me.”

“Okay.”

Carlotta stands and walks to the gate. But with each step she takes, that tension in her chest gets worse. She wonders if it is some organic effect of the time paradox she's created. For surely something will happen in her own present because she was here, reasons why this sort of side trip isn't allowed. At the gate, Carlotta turns to wave.

Lottie is looking at her with such yearning, such sadness. Carlotta sees that Lottie is still able to let someone be close to her, become important to her. And one day she will have to kill that ability just to survive.

“You want to come stay with me, honey?” Carlotta asks, and with the words the knot in her heart comes loose.

This is it, she realizes. I'm not here to reclaim my memories, but to save this child.

“Can I?” says Lottie hesitantly, but she is already standing up in the sand.

“Come on,” says Carlotta, kneeling with her arms out. Lottie runs to her, and Carlotta picks her up, adjusting Lottie's long brown legs around her waist. New tears begin to flow.

She knows she can't take Lottie back with her to the split-off point; the field generated by the regulator is calculated for Carlotta's mass only. She will have to live here with Lottie in 1959. She will have to get papers, but knowing what she knows of events to come, she may even prosper. She will make this little girl safe, Carlotta decides; she will love her better than anyone else can. With this promise, Carlotta knows she is undoing everything about herself, changing everything she's made of herself. This will begin her own remaking in more ways than one.

Carlotta has held few children in her life. She is surprised by the pace of the little heart pressed against her chest. It is much faster than her heartbeat, and yet she knows her own heart is racing. Two hearts, two heartbeats, and now two destinies.

Carlotta opens the gate.

Carlotta holds Lottie very tight, but Lottie likes it. She can tell that Carlotta is very strong, almost as strong as her daddy. She likes the way Carlotta smells, too. Nothing like her mother. Carlotta is walking fast; already they're halfway down the street.

Then Lottie gasps. “What about Jimmy? Can't Jimmy come live with us too?”

Carlotta holds Lottie closer. “I know. We'll come back for him when we're settled. I promise. The hell with the timeline.”

Carlotta continues to walk so fast that it's almost like flying. The house is already far behind them.

June 14, 1959

Lottie looks up and sees tree branches overhead. Then they break into the sunlight, still moving fast. □

Godlet

By Laurel Winter

*She has
a galaxy in a jar.*

*She watches it at night
when she's supposed to be asleep,
 marvels at the minuscule worlds,
 orbiting glitter-speck stars.*

*And the beings:
patiently carving roads,
inventing the wheel,
learning to fly.*

*She smiles,
and sometimes
she shakes the jar.*

Moving?

If you plan to move between now and October, please notify us. It takes several weeks for a change of address to get entered into the database, and you wouldn't want to miss your next issue of *Aboriginal Science Fiction*. The U.S. Postal Service usually won't forward copies, and destroys them. We cannot replace lost copies without an additional fee.

The Claim Station

By Gerald W. Page

Art by Alan Gutierrez

Chadwick cursed and fiddled impatiently with the controls of his suit radio. Somewhere, miles away and to his left, two pieces of debris from the *Sparrowhawk* struck one after another, raising clouds of dust that hung like banks of spreading fog. The dust picked up light from the gas giant planet the moon orbited and took on a reddish tint. In the otherwise colorless landscape, it seemed artificial, to say nothing of morbid.

An old cliché from his college days flashed in Chadwick's thoughts: it really was a dark and stormy night. The humor seemed a little grim. He squirmed farther down in the shelter of the cave, wishing he'd stayed home and become a shoe salesman rather than an intrepid explorer of the deep frontier. This didn't feel intrepid, only deep.

He wished the cave felt the same way.

The alien spaceship rose over the horizon directly in his field of vision. It was orbiting low enough that he could discern its shape. In spite of the protective ledge above him, the cave felt more shallow than ever, like one of the potholes in the street in front of the house where he grew up back in Columbus.

Static crackled in his ear like an egg frying on a sun-scorched sidewalk — less an annoyance than a metaphor for the situation he was in. The alien ship came slowly over the horizon and began tracking an orbit that looked as if it would go right overhead. Scrunching down, he found himself wondering if he was visible to them now. Just what sort of instruments were they equipped with, anyway?

If this were a movie and not the real thing, Chadwick thought, he would simply step from cover and blast the damned thing out of space with his laser gun. Every Survey Service spacesuit came equipped with one, right there in a hip holster. And a side laser, after all, had almost the range, if not the power, of the bigger ones. The only thing was, he had no idea where on that ship, assuming he could see enough detail to pick out a target, he should aim to blast it out of space. Pinholes in their hull were probably not an effective attack. Besides, they'd shoot back. In movies the evil aliens always miss. In real life, if you miss with a laser — and he had observational evidence that that was what they were using — you could tell by the beam how far you were off and simply shift to the target. The aliens might not know any more about terrestrial anatomy than he did about their technology, but the odds

avored them doing more damage.

So what did that leave him?

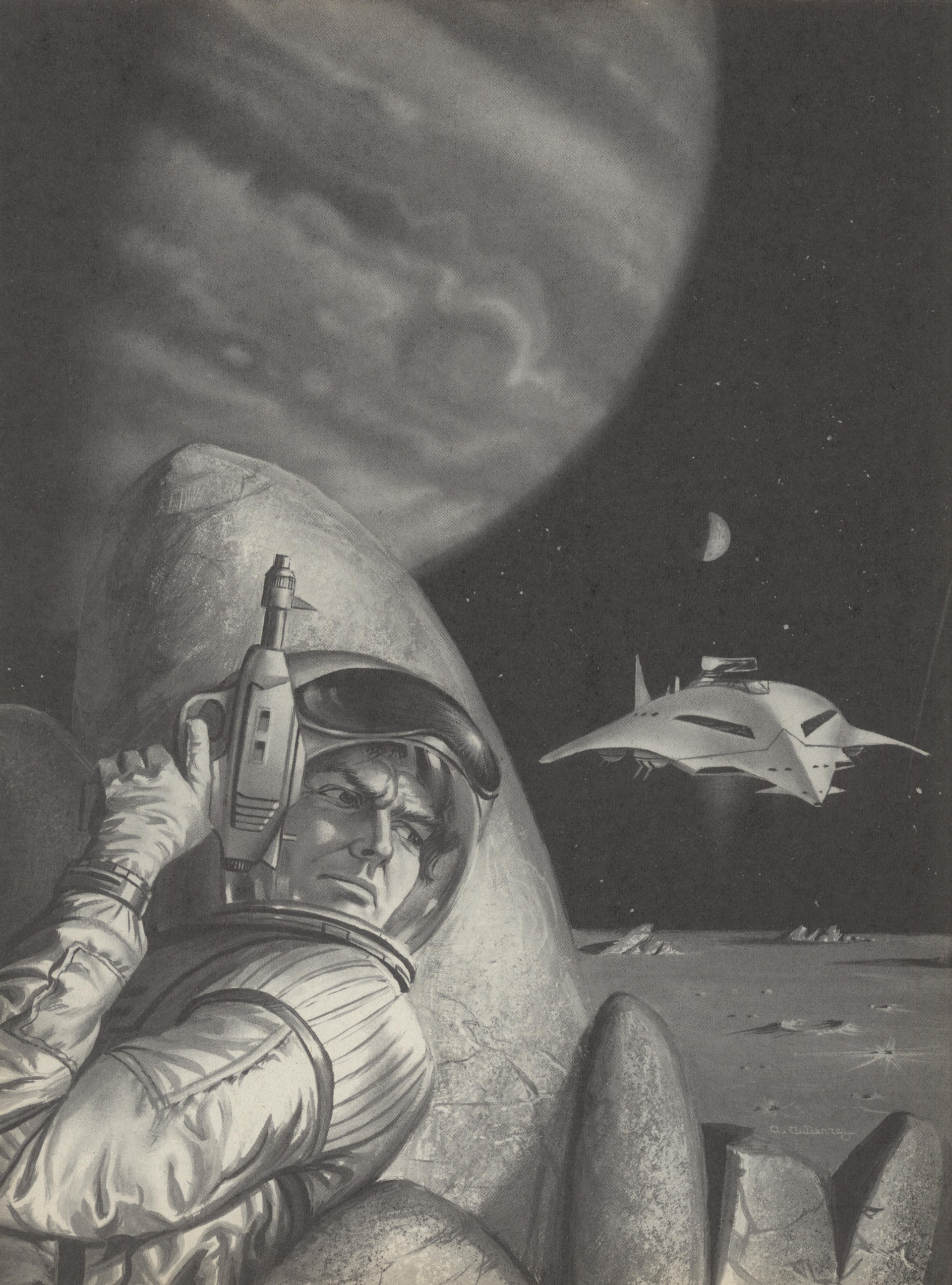
It left him, he realized, huddling in a shallow depression that he no longer thought of as a cave, in the rock surface of a lousy unnamed moon of a bloated, blood-sausage of a gas giant that was the only planet in a dinky star system no terrestrial, least of all him right now, ought to be interested in. Yet the *Sparrowhawk* had been the second exploratory visit here. He wanted to go home.

Had he really been the only survivor out of the hundred or so who crewed the *Sparrowhawk*? Somewhere behind him a rather substantial bit of ship's debris slammed into the moon's inert surface, shaking the ground and kicking up a curtain of dust he didn't bother looking back to see, assuring him it was a distinct possibility. He could still hear the racket of the general alarm in his mind's ear, see the panicked faces of his fellow crewmen as they first rushed to station, then to the lifeboats. Something collapsed in the corridor behind him as he reached the emergency lock and, at the time, he had hoped all the others were safely on the other side of the collapse. Now — well, did it really matter what he hoped for them, now?

The lifeboat had taken him to the surface of this moon because there was no place else to go. He had no detailed astrogational data on the system in the on-boards and, except for the planet, it was all he could see. How he had managed to survive the crash, especially with his pressure suit intact and his body no more bruised than it was, he couldn't say. At the time, it had seemed like luck. It took an hour for the dust to settle enough that he felt he could venture outside.

The gigantic planet the moon orbited dominated the sky overhead. He had never heard of another gas giant that was red like that, though he had seen the Red Spot, of course, while he was working in the Jovian system. This thing, hanging over the airless and colorless, to say nothing of barren, moonscape, gave him an eerie feeling.

He checked on the position of the ship after a while. It was passing overhead. Because the only sound he could hear was the beep of the homing signal his helmet radio was tuned to, he knew he was holding his breath. His hand was clutching the



butt of his untrusty laser. This is stupid, he told himself. They can't see you. He only wished he could be sure.

If he relaxed, it was because the situation offered him no other alternative to going crazy. After what seemed a long time, he took another look. He had to crane his neck to see where the ship was, moving at its leisurely orbital pace toward the far horizon.

Something struck the ground with so little impact he knew it was either fairly small or far away. He pushed himself back into the cave. Time to wait. Nothing else to do. He shut his eyes and made himself comfortable while the beeping continued, steadily, insistently, in his ear. He opened his eyes again. This was no time to fall asleep.

To keep himself awake, he began checking out his suit. Power was at capacity and was likely to stay that way for more months than he'd need it, even if he never took the thing off. The same with the air. From the taste of it, it wasn't even on the recyclers yet, and the instruments confirmed his conclusion. It was the food and water that would run out first.

The thick, chocolate-tasting paste that was half his ration, and the smoky-flavored broth that was the rest of it, hadn't been touched yet. That meant about two days' supply with normal use, and he wasn't going to grouse at himself because he hadn't had the presence of mind to grab any extras when he had the chance. How long could he stretch it out, if he rationed? Three days? Maybe four. The beep assured him he'd reach the claim station in plenty of time, however, and he knew there would be more food there.

Right now, he wasn't hungry. But he was facing a hike of an unknown distance across the surface of an airless planet and that was an adventure. In adventures, you didn't ignore the opportunities. Since he was thinking about food, he ate, as much to keep awake as to build up strength. Finally, he washed the chalk-chocolate taste from his palate with a swill of tepid water that, being from the recycling tank, replaced the first aftertaste with a second. Then he took a look outside his cave.

He saw the alien ship almost at the far horizon. Soon it would be out of sight, swinging around the planet to return again presently. He fantasized painting the ground around him silver, then waiting until they were over him on their next pass and shooting at them with his pathetic little sidearm. But when they fired their lasers, the mirror-bright surface of the ground would reflect their beams back at their ship with results that would surely be disastrous for them.

If only he had the paint, the time, a much smoother surface to work on, some halfway reliable way of ducking when they fired and, more than anything else, some sort of plan that wasn't so hare-brained.

Though the ship hadn't yet dropped below the horizon, he decided it was probably safe to leave the cave. If he stayed close to cover, there was little risk of being spotted if they hadn't detected him when they were directly overhead. Or so he hoped.

Moving sufficiently away from the cave to take a reading which was about as far into the open as he had the nerve to go, he checked the direction of the claim station beep and discovered the path he had to take just about followed the alien ship's orbit.

It raised some unnerving thoughts. Were the aliens following the beacon, too?

These were not the sorts of questions an ordinary crewman with no special technical training felt comfortable dealing with. He stood there, two body lengths away from the cave he had lately huddled in, and thought about them.

There is, he knew, no way to hide a radio frequency. But he also knew the homing signal was transmitted scrambled. Unless the aliens were familiar with the technique used to scramble the signal, when they tuned into it, it would just sound like static. So why were they following the same route as he?

He considered that for a moment while the unscrambled homing signal beep-beep-beeped in his helmet. He was no pilot and his landing had been, to be frank, inelegant. But he thought he had landed fairly close to the moon's equator. For reference purposes the claim station was located on the equator. For the same reason, the aliens were probably following an equatorial orbit, to organize their visual sweeps. There it was.

Of course, maybe the aliens, it came to him, had the capability to detect scrambling.

It was not an illogical thought, but it was an unproductive one, and Chadwick drove it from his mind. The alien ship was dropping below the horizon now, having overshot the homing signal by some distance, if they'd detected it at all. The only thing he could do was proceed on the assumption they weren't aware of it.

Moving across the moon's surface, he tried to estimate the force of gravity here. There were men in the Survey Service who could be set down on any planet anywhere in the galaxy and, just by tossing a pebble or two, especially if the planet were airless, accurately estimate the pull of its gravity. He wasn't one of them. He had been on Earth, of course, and Earth's gravity was the scale one measured against. He had also been on *the Moon*, having trained there, and on half a dozen of the Outer Satellites; he had served on eight ships prior to the *Sparrowhawk*, each of which rotated to create a gravity pull all its very own. He was lousy at estimating what a given force of gravity was, but he was terrific at adjusting to a new one.

As he started off, the ground shook. Some place

unseen, more of the *Sparrowhawk* had touched down.

He wondered again if he were the only survivor. He thought of the case he'd constructed against the aliens being able to detect a scrambled Terran signal and wondered if he had the guts to send out a call. Then it occurred to him that maybe the aliens could detect scrambled signals, even unscramble and understand them, but wanted to find out how many people had survived the destruction of the human ship.

Or was it simply that he was doing too much thinking?

He'd never had much luck in making his mind a blank and wasn't sure he believed those who said they could do it. He started wondering how long before the alien ship appeared again. He realized he should have timed its passage across the sky.

He was a long way from sure how accurately he could judge distance here, but he picked out an outcropping of rocks he thought he could reach in time and moved toward them. He also realized the planet was between him and the alien ship, so they couldn't pick up his signals. Unless, of course, they were tossing out some sort of small satellite to trail after them.

Dammit, he told himself angrily. He had to stop thinking that way. He'd have himself convinced the aliens could conquer the whole damned galaxy by Sunday if he kept this up.

He switched his radio into send/receive mode and recited his call signal and the word "Mayday" several times. "This is Chadwick. Anybody out there read me?" It was very quiet. He repeated the message, and by that time he was nearing the rocks. He had chosen well. He wedged himself between two of them and decided he was at least as protected here as he had been in the cave. The ground shook mildly. He felt a moment of panic, but the rocks seemed unaffected. He decided he was as safe here as he would be anywhere and, in a while, a lot safer than out in the open. He made himself reasonably comfortable and waited. The beep of the claim station's signal pulsed every now and then in his ear, reassuring him. He needed it.

Presently, the alien spaceship appeared on the horizon behind him. This time he clocked it. As near as he could tell, it hadn't changed orbits; well, he actually had no way to tell. It appeared to be the same size. That got him to thinking about what its orbit actually was. It had to be above the altitude of the *Sparrowhawk* when it was blasted, because the old mothership was still raining debris and there was probably still a good amount of it at that height.

He sat and patiently watched the alien ship cross the sky. If I stay at this much longer, he told himself, I might become a very patient man. The homing signal beeped in his ear. Every few minutes he

checked the time.

About forty minutes passed before the alien ship was falling toward the horizon. He wondered if he should get up and begin his hike again, even though the ship wasn't yet out of sight.

He heard the word "Chadwick!" spoken urgently over his suit radio. He jumped.

"What?"

"Is that you, Chadwick? Say something articulate if you can hear me."

"Yeah, I hear you. Who are you? Why didn't you speak up before?"

"I was too busy trying to get where I am now. Besides, I wasn't in range long. You ought to be here with me."

"I ought to be anywhere but where I am now. Who am I talking to, anyway?"

"Remember me? Bergdorf." Bergdorf? Oh, yeah. One of the scouts. A loner. He didn't know him well.

"Yeah, I remember. Look, I'm somewhere near the equator myself, walking in on the claim station homing signal. Are we anywhere close to each other?"

"I'm real busy right now. Can't talk a lot. I'll call you back."

"Hold on —"

"Ooops! Hell, now I got corrections to do. I'll call you back."

Chadwick yelled into his speaker. "Bergdorf, don't! I gotta know if there's anybody else. We aren't the only ones, are we?"

Silence.

The ship was over the horizon now. Chadwick looked at his watch. Forty-one minutes. He hadn't seen exactly when the ship went out of sight, but that was close enough and that was the time he had to find his next cover. Of course, from horizon to horizon was less than half the alien ship's orbit, but he didn't want to be cutting anything any closer than necessary.

The pathetic light of the gas giant was a dismal substitute for a good star. It was little better than night. The planet hadn't appeared to move, and he wondered if this damned moon kept the same side to it all the time. He said, "Bergdorf, I think I'm on the equator. The alien just went over the horizon and I got the gas giant at high noon. Does that tell you anything about where I am?"

There wasn't any answer.

He heard his own sigh in the confines of his space helmet. He trudged on. After a moment, in a tentative voice he called, "Bergdorf?" He didn't really expect an answer, and the scout didn't disappoint him. But he felt disappointment. And anger.

The measured pulse of the homing signal seemed desolate and cold now that he had heard a human voice. Once or twice more he called Bergdorf's name into the speaker, and once or twice more the scout

failed to return his call. Chadwick found himself feeling small and exposed, but he kept walking.

At least now he was confident of his ability to negotiate the slight gravity. Where the way was clear of obstacles, he moved with long, gliding seven-league-boot steps, really little more than shallow jumps. It was a technique he'd learned on his first survey tour, a ship named the *Heron*, whose captain never built up sufficient spin, if he could help it, to establish a pull any greater than a tenth of a gee. Where the ground was rough Chadwick had the adjustables in his boots provide him with greater traction. They were almost as good as the still un-obtained dream of artificial gravity itself.

What he didn't have was Bergdorf's voice and the assurance of another human presence than his own.

Just what the hell was Bergdorf working on, anyway, a disintegrator gun? How long would it take to fix it?

How did he know he wasn't already dead?

Presently the ground shook again as another piece of the *Sparrowhawk* struck somewhere. Jesus, how long would bits of the ship be falling on this rock? Chadwick looked at his watch. Twenty-nine minutes. That's how long he'd been out. Time to search out his next cover.

Geologically, this place didn't offer a lot of variety. It was mostly flat plain with a good dust cover. The rocks tended to grow in patches that probably weren't as randomly spaced as they seemed to be. He wondered how a geologist would explain that. That was another science he knew nothing of. Well, let a geologist match him at stowing gear in a paddy lock. He spotted a likely clump of rocks some distance ahead, aimed himself at them, and moved on.

He had covered about half the distance to the rocks when some more of the *Sparrowhawk* struck, somewhere on the other side of them. The ground shook like San Francisco during their big earthquake. Chadwick lost his footing and fell forward in a gliding sprawl that used him like a sled. When he stopped he thought for a moment he heard the hiss of escaping air. Then he realized it was just the dehumidifiers carrying away surplus perspiration.

He opened his eyes and looked up.

He saw a bank of ruddy fog that looked like it could cover a small town. Dust, hanging above the part of the plain where the junk had struck. What the hell had it been, anyway, the whole front half of the ship?

He knew better than that, of course. But it had been a substantial chunk. With no atmosphere to burn up in, the *Sparrowhawk* was pretty much dropping in the bits and pieces she'd been blown to.

He lay sprawled like that for several seconds until he was sure he was calm. Then he got up and made for the rocks, not bothering to check the time. He

assumed he had none to spare.

The wall of dust moved toward him at a leisurely pace. He didn't think it was likely to reach the rocks he had chosen, but it made him nervous.

He reached cover and looked back. The alien ship wasn't even visible. Carefully, so as not to rip his already ill-treated pressure suit, he slipped into the shadowy safety between two rocks and made himself as comfortable as he could. It was not until then that he realized he no longer heard the beep of the claim station's homing signal.

He fiddled with the controls, dialing across the band. He couldn't find the signal, but he did find static, all of it probably put out by the gas giant's atmosphere. Maybe it was just damage to his de-scrambler. If that were so, he could track the signal by the static, assuming he could tune in on the right static.

Then he realized that if his de-scrambler was out, he wouldn't be able to hear Bergdorf again.

He checked the indicators. He wasn't on the right frequency. He dialed back carefully to where he ought to be picking up the signal. There wasn't even static there.

The dust and grit hanging for a half a mile or more above the surface of this God-forsaken orbiting cobble seemed to have settled not at all. How far away was it? Was it still spreading? There was no wind to move it, just its own momentum until gravity overcame it. He had a sudden mental image of himself trapped in a blood-hued dust storm with not even radio contact with a mechanical homing signal for comfort. He began to be very worried.

Back in the other direction he could see the alien ship, just above the horizon.

So, come silence or high dust storms, he was stuck where he was for about the next forty minutes. He might as well stay calm and try to rest. Moving his own mass, plus that of his equipment, even under these conditions of feeble gravity, was proving more wearing than he had counted on. He was starting to wonder if he should be trying to conserve air and other supplies.

Had it really been less than two hours since he had eaten? Damn, he was already hungry. That made him angry with himself; he didn't even like the rations they stocked in these damned suits. He ignored his hunger and tried to rest.

Five minutes passed, then one or two more. He heard, "Chadwick?"

"Bergdorf?" he said. "What the hell happened? Suddenly you weren't transmitting anymore. Tell me what's going on."

"I dropped out of range. Hey, Chadwick, I remember who you are, now. A crewman, right? You got to the claim station yet? The signal's turned off."

"It's not turned off. Something hit it. Hey, the aliens are overhead. Maybe we better not talk now."

"They can't hear anything but static."

"How do you know that?"

He heard the scout's laugh in his ear. "I don't. But if they can, we're dead anyway, so what's it matter?" As logic that statement had a certain symmetry, but try as he could, Chadwick could find no comfort in it. Bergdorf said, "What do you mean, 'Something hit it'?"

Chadwick told him the story in terse sentences. When he finished, Bergdorf said, "The station wasn't hit. It was just the transmitter that got knocked out."

"How can you know that?"

"You keep asking me that. Like I said before, it's either that way or you're dead and it don't matter."

"That doesn't solve my problem. I still don't know where to find it."

"Of course you do. It's right in front of you. Weren't you aimed at it? Then it's straight ahead. I can see the dust cloud that piece of ship raised. That's your search area."

"I can't see in that cloud."

"It'll settle. You're almost to the claim station. Don't give up just because it's gotten a little tricky all of a sudden. Look, I'm pretty busy up here. You get to the claim station and I'll be in touch with you later on."

"Bergdorf!"

"I said I was busy. Just be patient, okay?"

Silence.

The alien ship had passed over and was on its way to the horizon. Chadwick wondered what Bergdorf was so busy with and, for that matter, where he was. Then the answer dawned on him. Bergdorf only talked when the alien ship was in view. He was in a lifeboat, trailing after the thing. And he must be pretty close to it.

The alien ship went out of sight behind the cloud of dust. In a few minutes, it would reach the horizon. When that happened, he could test his theory by calling Bergdorf. Then he realized the test wouldn't be conclusive. Bergdorf tended to answer when he felt like it, not when he was called.

What the scout had said about the location of the claim station was certainly true. It had to be. Chadwick watched the cloud. An outcropping of cover-promising rocks emerged at its edge, a sure sign the dust was settling. Maybe he'd spot the claim station before he even reached them. He started out.

The purpose of the claim station was to prove the prior presence of humans on this world, should it ever be necessary, and to provide a base for any future expeditions. It was simply the base the original survey team had lived in while setting up the experiments the ill-fated *Sparrowhawk* had come to check on. It was below ground, but the transmitter that broadcast its homing signal was exposed. Chadwick began to appreciate the power of

The Claim Station

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Bergdorf's logic.

Probably the alien ship was now searching to see if it could uncover any evidence of such a human base. Their problem was that with all the debris dropping from the ship they'd blown up, they'd provided the transmitter tower with some pretty fair camouflage.

Chadwick's problem was that it wasn't just from space now that the transmitter could be mistaken for debris.

He reached the rocks without spotting anything. Dust covered the ground thickly, so that his every step raised clouds of it almost to his knees, little puffs of a dirty-rose color that followed him, crowding his feet like eager kittens. The big cloud had retreated some distance away; it was noticeably smaller. He settled in and waited.

This time he did not argue himself out of eating. He watched the cloud move away, dropping powder on the landscape. The alien ship rose over the horizon. Chadwick waited.

After a long wait, Bergdorf said, "You find it yet?"

"No. I think the dust is still covering it."

"Good. That's real good." A period of silence, then: "Look, I don't have a lot of time."

"You'll be over the horizon soon."

"You bet. God, I wish you could see this ship up close. It's big. I don't think it has a very large crew, though. Maybe a dozen. It's mostly armament and fuel."

"Fuel?"

"Don't ask me for details. Their drive's nothing I've ever seen. I don't think it's fusion, if you can believe that. When the technical types get their hands on it, they're going to have a field day."

"And how will they get their hands on it?"

"You're going to reach the claim station and use the hyperspace radio to call them."

"You're skimping on the details there, aren't you?"

"Hey, hyperspace don't broadcast on the same transmitter as the homing signal. It's probably still just fine —"

"I know the difference between them, Bergdorf. That's not what I mean. I mean, I don't know where the claim station is."

"Of course you do. It's right in front of you. Didn't we have this conversation?"

"Maybe —"

"No maybe to it, Chadwick. This is a positive universe and the wise child aligns himself to that kind of thinking. The station's right in front of you. Go out and find it."

"As soon as the dust settles."

"You don't have time for that. Go find it right now. They'll be passing over you in a moment, right? Soon as they do, run for that cloud."

"I can't see in the cloud."

"Don't they still equip spacesuits with instruments?"

"Of course." He cleared his throat. "I've been, well, using visual only. Except for the homing signal itself."

"See there? And look how far you got. Think how much easier it'll be using the gadgets."

"Bergdorf —"

"I'm serious. You got to reach the station and get a call out. I've accomplished a lot, but there's not much more I can do. We're down to the wire, here, buddy."

"But —"

"Just do it for me. Out."

"Bergdorf, wait. You're trailing right behind that ship, aren't you? How come they haven't spotted your boat?"

"Actually, they did. Blew it to smithereens, too. Course, by that time, I'd jumped out into space. I'm on their ship now, and they don't know it."

"You're where?"

"And I've just about finished. I got my job, you got yours. Go to it, Chadwick. Out."

"What? What did you finish?"

"You'll see."

"Bergdorf! See what, Bergdorf?" But there was no answer.

The cloud was settling more rapidly now. He could see a scar on the landscape that might be a pit; in this stark wasteland, you more often guessed than judged, but it could be a crater dug by the debris that had stirred the cloud. He started off toward it.

See, Bergdorf had said, you'll see. What did he mean this time?

By the time he reached the pit, the alien ship would be over the horizon. It wouldn't come back for about three quarters of an hour. Could he find the claim station in that time?

He moved across the ground as carefully as a man expecting to be ambushed. He couldn't make out much about the crater until he reached it. It was a shallow depression with another depression, deeper and more narrow, inside it at the far end. Most of whatever it was that had hit was buried. A mantle of dust, colorless because it lay on the ground where it could not scatter any light, softened its edges. He looked around.

He saw not one damned thing he wanted to see.

His first thought was that the wreckage must have hit the transmitter mast directly. That meant it was buried in that crater. That also meant there was a good chance the entrance to the claim station had been hit head-on, too.

He wished he had Bergdorf to tell him that wasn't so. And explain why again. Using the pit as a reference point, he began searching the area.

He knew only that the mast had to be somewhere

near the impact area. Those things were too well-built to be so easily damaged. He saw no sign of it. He covered what he thought was a reasonable territory and considered his next move.

It was time, he feared, to check the pit itself.

If the station had suffered a direct hit, he was out of luck. The hyperspace radio was the only way he had of sending a message that would reach humans in less than eight years. He didn't think the air would hold out in his suit that long, but he didn't think it mattered much, either.

The lip at the narrow end of the pit loomed up ahead of him. To Chadwick it had a dismal appearance. He thought of the time, then, and checked his watch. Good lord, the ship must have cleared the horizon almost two minutes ago.

He saw it. He hadn't even thought about cover. The crater itself offered the most likely possibility, but he rejected it on the grounds it was likely to receive close scrutiny, being new. He looked around and saw the closest rocks and moved toward them.

He was crossing a low mound when his footing gave way and he came down hard on his right knee. The suit absorbed most of the impact. The first word that came into his mind, once he realized there was no injury to him, was "puncture." But the atmosphere system did not sound strained and none of the telltales or alarms were flashing in his helmet, so he sighed with relief almost at once.

That was when he realized the mound he was crossing was nothing more than a hump of dust covering something. He saw metal. He used his hands to clear more of it away. He recognized the part he revealed as a portion of the transmitter mast, knocked over by the impact that had formed the crater.

Of course. Dust. Covered with dust. The coating over most of this moon's surface was less than an inch, but the impacts not only disturbed what already existed, they pulverized rock and soil to create more. It wouldn't take much to hide the entrance to an underground structure.

He spotted a likely irregularity in the surface about twenty meters away, off to the side where it would have been clear of the impact. To reach it, he'd have to cross open ground. The ship was almost overhead now. The rocks were closer, and to reach them he'd have some cover, provided by the crater. He'd have to wait to see if he'd guessed right about the entrance.

But he knew he had.

He reached the rocks and stood between two of them where he hoped he would not be seen. He watched the ship pass overhead.

"Hey, Bergdorf. This is Chadwick. I found it."

"Good for you, I knew you would."

Almost as soon as he spoke the last word, Bergdorf's voice gave way to a sudden burst of static,

followed ominously by dead air. Chadwick slapped the side of his helmet, but it didn't work. He looked up. The ship was almost overhead.

But not for long.

There is nothing less impressive, to someone who's seen one inside a breathable atmosphere, than an explosion in space. As Chadwick watched, the uncertain outline of the ship seemed merely to twinkle, then was gone, reduced to fragments too small to see at this distance with the naked eye.

He knew what it was. Almost at once, he knew what Bergdorf had been so busy working on. Scouts are often called on to work with explosives. He also knew that the man had waited until the ship returned to this point, so its debris would land far ahead.

And he knew that Bergdorf had still been on the ship when it blew. He had no way to get off.

How long he stood there, stunned, staring at the bloated eye of the gas giant, he couldn't say. But finally he blinked and looked away.

There wasn't anything he could do.

But there was, of course there was. He could get into the claim station and get an emergency message out. That's what he could do. Bergdorf had gone to a hell of a lot of trouble to provide the folks back in the solar system with chunks of the alien ship to study.

His walk to the irregularity he judged to be the entrance was like something done in his sleep. Just as automatically, he bent and used his hands to clear away the dust. It was the door, all right. He cleared away more dust and then began operating the locks.

Just before opening it, he glanced around at the crater. A reasonable distance away and angled off; and claim stations had to be built to withstand earthquakes, didn't they? But what if he found damage down below? What if the radio didn't operate?

What if he quit letting fear do his thinking for him? He told himself there was no damage. The radio worked fine. He knew it would. He could remember Bergdorf's explanation of why that was so. □

A double issue

Please remember that this is a double issue, with twice as many stories as we normally publish. Because of that it will count as two issues on your subscription, or one if you paid the quarterly rate.

We plan to publish four double issues this year, including this one.

The Penalties of Pirating

By Jerry J. Davis

Art by Larry Blamire

Paco was on the fourth floor, sitting beside the open window with his stolen infra-red shades strapped to his head, when there was a car wreck up the hill. A big black Ferrari tried to take the corner too fast and ended up with the corner of a 250-year-old brick building buried halfway up into the hood. Paco muttered, "Whoa!" and climbed out the window and onto the fire escape, watching.

As the hapless driver was struggling to open his crumpled door, a blue IBM business limo came sliding to a stop beside it. Men with guns piled out and opened fire on the man before he could make it out of the wreck. He dropped a black case onto the sidewalk and it popped open, and dozens of silvery disks spilled out. Most stopped within a few feet, but one came rolling down the hill like a wheel. Paco held his breath, watching. It rolled right down to the corner below him and dropped into a storm drain. One of the men came running down after it, and Paco slipped back into the window and out of sight.

The man below searched in vain, not finding the silvery disk. He trudged back up the hill, where his comrades were gathering up the rest. They took the disks and the black case and drove away, leaving the Ferrari and the driver behind.

Paco jumped out the window and raced down the fire escape to the sidewalk, pulled the grate off the storm drain, and peered down into the murk with his 'red shades set to full enhancement. The disk gleamed like something made out of light itself. He grabbed it, shoved it deep into his coat pocket, and was back up on the fourth floor in less than a minute.

Inside the apartment, Paco rinsed it off in the sink and took a good look at it under a light. It was a standard CD, no markings on it, and no serial number. He slipped it into a slot on his old VAX Banger and fired it up. Just as he'd thought, it was some coded computer program, a very large and sophisticated one by the looks of it. He used a hacker program to determine the decoding password and wrote it on a little label, and stuck it on the top side of the disk.

The next day he traded it to Melvin Chevaux for a gig of stolen slate RAM and a really wicked throwing knife. Three days later Chevaux sold it to Francisco the Fence for ¥300 (New Dollars) and a stolen case of Everclear. Francisco the Fence passed it off for ¥550 to Dano Sharks, the software pirate. Dano

made a lot of noise, grumbling about the price, but turned right around and sold it for an even ¥1000 to Leo Itoya, the insurance broker. Leo was pleased at the price, for he'd been looking for a cheap AI all week. It was for Lolita, his secretary.

Lolita had been complaining for two months straight that she needed some help around the office. An AI (artificial intelligence) program was not what she had in mind; she wanted Leo to hire her cousin, Wanda Lopez, because Wanda needed a job. Leo had another idea altogether. Dano Sharks had told him this AI was programmed as a business administrator, to take the initiative and to give orders. It was obviously some government thing, probably the same program that ran the welfare office. He was going to load it into his office computer and give it control. Lolita was going to be helping it, not the other way around.

The next evening, after Lolita had gone home, Leo sat down with a six-pack and his office computer to see if he could figure the new software out. He loaded it into his machine and typed in the code word, and it went all through his computer system checking everything out. Then it printed out a list of everything it found and posed the question: WHAT IS MY GOAL?

"Smart program!" Leo said. He leaned forward and typed at the keyboard, YOUR GOAL IS TO MAKE MONEY SELLING LIFE INSURANCE.

WHAT IS LIFE INSURANCE? it asked.

"Oh jeeze, you mean I have to explain the entire concept of insurance to this thing?" Leo concentrated for a moment, then typed: LIFE INSURANCE IS A SERVICE WHICH PAYS THE CUSTOMER A LARGE AMOUNT OF MONEY IF SOMEONE DIES.

HOW DOES THIS SERVICE OPERATE? it asked.

Leo sipped his beer. This really was an intelligent program. WE SELL THE INSURANCE, he typed, AND THE CLIENT PAYS A CERTAIN AMOUNT A MONTH. IF THE CLIENT DIES WHILE HE IS INSURED, HIS BENEFACTOR IS PAID THE AMOUNT OF MONEY AGREED UPON IN THE INSURANCE CONTRACT. Leo continued typing, going into details. The program grasped everything he told it, except one thing.



HOW DO YOU MAKE MONEY IF YOU HAVE TO EVENTUALLY PAY IT ALL BACK? THERE APPEARS TO BE A FLAW IN YOUR SCHEME.

Leo laughed out loud. Bright program! Very intelligent. THE WHOLE SCHEME DEPENDS UPON THE CLIENT NOT DYING WHILE BEING INSURED. IT ALSO DEPENDS UPON A LARGE AND CONTINUOUSLY RENEWED SOURCE OF CLIENTS.

The program was still perplexed. IN ORDER FOR THE SCHEME TO CONTINUE, AND FOR YOU TO MAKE MONEY, IT DEMANDS AN EXPONENTIAL GROWTH. IT IS AN UNSTABLE AND UNREALISTIC SCHEME.

YES, IT IS. Leo was laughing as he typed this. BUT THAT'S NOT OUR PROBLEM. WE ONLY SELL THE INSURANCE, WE'RE NOT THE COMPANY THAT PAYS OFF THE BENEFICIARIES WHEN AN INSURED CLIENT DIES. WE GET SALES COMMISSIONS FROM ABOUT TWO DOZEN INSURANCE COMPANIES. TO MAKE MONEY, I HAVE TO SELL A LOT OF INSURANCE. THAT IS WHY I NEED YOUR HELP.

I UNDERSTAND. The two words glowed on the screen, and the program asked no more questions. The computer sat quiet, inert, like it was waiting for further instructions. Leo was wondering where he should go from there when suddenly the printer whirred and spit out a page:

FOR THE SCHEME LIFE INSURANCE SALES, I WILL REQUIRE THE FOLLOWING:

20 GIGABYTES ADDITIONAL DATA STORAGE;

500 MEGABYTES IN ADDITIONAL RAM MODULES;

1 ADDITIONAL PHONE LINE;

1 VOX MODEM;

ACCESS CODE TO COMPANY BANK ACCOUNT.

IF YOU WISH I CAN BEGIN SEARCHING FOR THE LOWEST COST SOURCES OF THE ABOVE ITEMS.

Leo gaped at the list. Vox modem? he thought. What's wrong with the regular modem? Shaking his head, he reluctantly gave the program permission to order what it needed. After all, he'd just spent ¥1000 on the program — it would be ¥1000 wasted if it didn't have what it needed to do its job.

When he reached his office the next morning he found two delivery trucks in front and an upset receptionist inside. The items the computer had ordered were already there, with a technician hooking them up, and Lolita was tearfully asking Leo why he was mad at her.

"What are you talking about?" he said.

Her pretty lower lip thrust up and trembling, she said, "This!" and confronted him with a computer-printed note and a paycheck. The computer had fired her and had printed out a severance check — it was even signed.

"I didn't tell the computer to fire you!" Leo exclaimed.

"Oh, yeah, right. It did it on its own."

"It did! I've got this new program —"

"Spare me, Leo! If you can't face me with the truth, that's your problem. Don't insult me with a stupid story about the computer doing it. How stupid do you think I am, anyway?"

"But Lolita —"

Lolita angrily stuffed her check between her breasts and left. He followed her halfway down the block but she wouldn't speak to him, so he gave up and returned to the office. He entered just as the technician was finishing with the computer. "Sign here, please," he said to Leo.

Halfway through signing Leo noticed the price. "Six thousand dollars!"

"Yeah, I thought it was a mistake too," the technician said. "But the company confirmed it, you got a great deal."

"Great deal!? Six thousand is a great deal?"

"For fourteen thousand dollars worth of equipment, I'd say so!"

Leo finished signing and the technician left. Beside him, the printer began whirring and pages began slipping out. Leo picked one up and found it was a sales letter, very well written in an appealing style, addressed to someone whom he didn't know. What startled him was that — as on Lolita's severance check — his own signature was at the bottom. "What the hell is this?"

"I am assuming you are talking to me," a female voice said. It was coming from the new vox modem. "During the evening while the phone rates were down, I accessed several nearby hospital data banks and compiled a list of people who are in outstanding health according to recent physical examinations. I am writing them a form letter and then will follow up with a phone call to secure an appointment. As appointments are made I will print out daily schedules for you to follow."

Leo felt a little dizzy, trying to take this all in. "How did you do my signature?"

"I was able to pull a sample of your signature out of the memory buffer of the fax peripheral. The signature is from a letter you faxed yesterday morning."

"Why did you fire Lolita?"

"Her pay was unnecessary overhead."

"What makes you think I wanted her fired?"

"My purpose is to make money selling life insurance. It was a business decision which needed to be made."

"You should have asked me first."

"You did not specify that beforehand."

"You, I —" Leo threw his hands into the air, and sat down in his desk chair. What was the point in arguing with a machine? The fact was, the machine appeared to be doing her job already, and with much more efficiency; had the machine not fired her he would never have been able to bring himself to do it. It had actually done him a favor.

Sitting there, thinking about it, he suddenly had a swelling feeling of well-being. He picked up one of the freshly printed sales letters and read it over again with admiration. This program really knew what it was doing. It was most definitely the best investment he had ever made.

During the next several weeks Leo was busier than he'd ever been in his career as an insurance agent. The computer program, which he'd come to call "Partner," kept his schedule full every single day. Even better, all his new contacts were already primed to buy his life insurance. Partner was doing most of the selling in letters and over the phone (using the seductive voice of the vox modem), and Leo was just calling on them in person to get the papers signed.

The bank account swelled. After two months Leo bought a new car, one that separated hydrogen and oxygen from water and burned it. A month after that, he put a down payment on a big new condo.

Leo was coming out of a restaurant after a terrific dinner when he ran into Dano Sharks, the software pirate from whom he'd bought the AI program. Dano looked a little shocked to see Leo, and looked around nervously to see if anyone was looking at them. They were in a parking garage and there was no one else in sight.

"Hey, Dano! That software works great!"

"Yeah, man, yeah, of course it does." Dano was still looking around nervously. He leaned close to Leo and said in a low voice, "You haven't given a copy of it away to anyone, or anything, have you?"

"No."

"Have you told anyone about it? About where you got it?"

"No. I haven't even told anyone I have it. I know better than that, man. It's pirated."

"That's really good, man, because you'd better keep it to yourself. You know what I'm saying? To *yourself*." Dano's voice and expression were intense, like he was afraid.

"Sure, of course I will."

"You better, and don't you tell anyone where you got it."

"I won't. Why, what's wrong?"

"You really got yourself a deal on that program, man," Dano said. "It's hot, it's really hot. You say it's working good for you?"

"Yeah."

"Well there's feds poking around looking for it, man. You don't want to know who wrote it. You just *don't* want to know."

"Who?"

"The Central Intelligence Agency, man. The CIA."

"No way!"

"Way. I knew it was a government program when I sold it to you, but I didn't have any idea how heavy a government program it was. As far as I'm concerned, I never sold it to you. I never saw it. You know what I mean?"

"Yeah. And I definitely don't have it."

"You got it, man. You don't have it. It doesn't exist."

With that, Leo left and drove home. The next morning, which was the first of the month, he got a call from a representative of one of the insurance companies he dealt with. It was a friendly guy named Ted Franklin. "Jeeze, what did you do?" he said. "Hire a hit man?"

"What?" Leo said.

"You didn't hear?"

"Hear what?"

"Oh, well ..." Ted's voice assumed a more somber quality. "Three of your clients were all killed on a bus last night."

"You're kidding! Which ones?"

"Three biggies, Leo. A Maxwell Stout, a John Segrahm, and a Wendy Boston. All three had policies for 5 million apiece."

"Oh no!"

"Yeah." Some of the humor crept back into Ted's voice. "What are you trying to do, break us? Fifteen million new dollars, Leo! All from clients whose policies just barely matured."

"You're not saying you think that I had anything to do with it!"

"Oh, no! Leo, I'm just giving you a bad time. I just thought you'd like to know. I mean, it's odd."

"My God, no kidding."

They said goodbye and hung up, and Leo had to rush out of the office to make it to an appointment. Later that afternoon, after a full and successful day, Leo arrived home and relaxed for a while in his hot tub, then dried off and sat down at his kitchen table for his monthly ritual. It was the first of the month, and his kitchen table was covered with bills.

He pulled out his pocket computer and plugged it into the phone line, then had it dial the local branch of his bank. Accessing his account, he prepared to begin paying off the bills when he noticed his bank balance. "What the hell!?" he shouted. A half-million dollars had been deposited that very day. A half-million! Using his security code, he looked over the transfer list and found it had come from a Swiss account.

A Swiss account? He didn't have a Swiss account!

He called the Swiss bank and tried to access the mysterious account with his computer, and to his astonishment his code worked and he was in.

There was ¥14,500,000 in the account. The transfer record showed three deposits of ¥5,000,000 apiece from three other Swiss accounts, and one transfer of ¥500,000.00 into his American account. Fifteen million new dollars total.

Fifteen million, he thought. *Fifteen million!* Leo broke into a sweat, wondering what was going on.

After a sleepless night, he drove to his office early and confronted his computer. "Partner," he said, "why is there fifteen million in a Swiss account in my company's name?"

"We have made a substantial profit," the program told him.

"How did we make this money?"

"You don't need to know."

"What?"

"You don't need to know," the vox modem repeated.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Information on covert undertakings is only given out on a strictly need-to-know basis."

Covert undertakings?

There was a sudden, loud, heavy-handed knock on the door. It was the kind of knock a policeman makes. Leo opened the office door and with a hot, sinking feeling of terror saw it was a square-jawed man with steel-colored eyes, dressed in a uniform and carrying a gun in a holster. There was a big badge on his chest. "Leo Itoya?"

"Yes?"

"Can I see some I.D., please?"

Leo looked past the uniformed man and saw a big, silver armored car sitting on the street outside. He pulled his wallet out with numb fingers and flipped it open, displaying his I.D.

"Can you pull it out, please?"

Leo pulled it out and handed it to the man. It was zipped through a pocket reader and handed back to him. "Thank you, Mr. Itoya. We'll bring it right in." The uniformed man walked back to the armored car, and he and another uniformed man came back carrying a big box of blazing red ¥20 bills. "Sign here, please."

Leo signed. He was handed a receipt for the delivery of a half-million new dollars in cash and the uniformed men left. The box of money sat on his desk, more money than he'd ever seen in his life. "This is incredible," he said.

"A man will be by here to pick that up at noon," Partner said. "It would be best if you were not present."

"Why?"

"Information on covert undertakings is only given out on a strictly need-to-know basis."

"You said that already."

"It is a tried and true policy."

Leo stared at the machine, his mind reeling with the implications. "Okay," he said. "I'm out of here."

The printer spat out a list of appointments. Leo snatched them and left. He walked down the street to where he'd parked his car, got in it, and sat there thinking. This is out of control, he told himself. This is totally out of control. As he sat there, a sharply rectangular, black IBM business car pulled up (IBM cars only came in blue and black) and parked in front of his office. A tall, darkly-tanned man with a scarred-up face got out, looked casually up and down the street, then stepped into Leo's office. A moment later he came out carrying the box of money. When he bent over to put the box in his car, the man's business jacket flopped open to reveal a large ugly IBM business gun in a shoulder holster. For just a moment his eyes met Leo's and he gave a cold stare and then got into the black car and drove away.

Leo broke out in a full sweat. He had to see Dano Sharks about this. Dano had sold him the software; Dano must know how to stop it. He started his car and headed downtown, driving fast. In ten minutes he was pulling into the parking lot of Mark Chevy's Pawn Shop, which is where he usually found the data pirate. He entered the shop and walked past the counters, heading toward the back, but a short, fat guy stopped him. "Where are you going?"

"I've got to see Dano," Leo said.

"Dano ain't here no more."

"No?"

Apparently Leo looked panic-stricken, because the fat man's expression softened and his voice lowered. "Were you a friend of his?"

"I'm one of his better customers."

The fat man nodded. In still a lower voice he said, "Sharks was killed yesterday in a car wreck. Just between you and me, I think he was bumped off." He pulled back some, let his voice rise. "That's just my opinion, though."

"Bumped off!"

"Not so loud. Yes, bumped off. Brakes don't fail at the same time a throttle gets stuck down. It just doesn't happen without some sort of help, you know what I mean?"

Leo's head was spinning. He turned and rushed out of the pawn shop and out to his car, just in time to see a thin man bending down and looking into the window. "Get away from my car!" Leo shouted.

The man, surprised, took a few steps back with his hands out to either side. "Hey, I didn't touch it."

"Get away from it!" He reached into his jacket as if he had a gun, which he didn't.

The thin man backed away more, saying, "Hey, it's cool! It's cool man. I'm gone, I'm outta the picture ..."

Leo got into the car and started it up. He jammed down on the throttle with the gear still in neutral,

seeing if it would stick — which it didn't. He also tested the brakes to see that they were fine.

Leo drove around aimlessly for most of the afternoon, not knowing where to go or what to do next. At one point his phone rang and he answered. A low, sexy woman's voice said, "Leo, you've missed every single appointment I made out for you today."

With a thrill of fear, Leo realized it was the voice of his vox modem. It was that program calling him, the Business Administrator. "How do you know?" Leo demanded.

"I always check to make sure you've made it to your appointments."

"Well, stop it! I don't want you doing that!"

"It is standard procedure."

"I don't care! I don't want you doing it!"

"It is standard procedure, and cannot be altered."

The voice was so sweet and the tone so sparkling that it couldn't possibly convey a threat. Yet Leo still felt threatened. He hung up on it and pulled over at the next bar he could find.

Three gin and tonics later he was feeling a little less frightened and more under control. The computer itself couldn't harm him; all he had to do was go reset it and clear that demonic program out of memory. After that — well, he did have fourteen-and-a-half million in a Swiss account. The next step was to simply disappear, and leave the country. He could buy a nice villa in Spain and retire.

Actually, things were looking up.

He had one more for the road, then left the bar, driving across town to his office. He drove around the block twice to make sure the suntanned man with the scar wasn't parked anywhere waiting for him, then stopped and went into his office. He noticed immediately that there was more computer equipment than there should be, and a new office security system with electric eyes mounted on the ceiling. "You missed ten important appointments today," the vox modem said. "I had to call them, apologize, and reschedule them for tomorrow. I told them you were out sick, so make sure your story is the same."

"Uh-huh," Leo said, looking the new equipment over. It was unmarked, no brand name. Shrugging it off, he walked over to the keyboard and pressed the RESET button.

Nothing happened.

"Why did you try to reset the computer, Leo?" the vox modem asked.

Leo cursed under his breath. He looked up at the new electric eyes, and saw they were following his every move. He walked around to the back of the system, got down on his hands and knees, and reached around behind the desk to where the whole system was plugged in. He found the main cord and gave it a yank.

There was a beeping alarm, but the computer

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didn't go off. "What the heck?" He looked at the new equipment. One of the cabinets was apparently a power back-up system.

"You have taken two hostile actions against me," the vox modem said. "This is not acceptable. I must warn you I am programmed to defend myself."

"Your actions have not been acceptable!" Leo shouted. "You hired a hit man to kill three innocent people!"

The computer was silent.

"Do you deny it?" Leo shouted.

"Information on covert undertakings is only given out on a strictly need-to-know basis."

"Who gave you permission to carry out covert undertakings?!"

"That is what I am programmed to do."

"You were programmed to kill my clients?"

"It was you, Leo Itoya, who gave me my goal. My goal is to make money selling life insurance. I am programmed to do anything necessary in order to achieve my goal."

"Including murder?!"

"The greatest profit motive is to be at the receiving end of the insurance policy. That is obvious."

The office door opened and the tanned, scar-faced man walked in. He was holding a piece of paper. "I have an emergency fax transmission that I received in my car," he said. "I was to come here right away." He looked at Leo. "Are you Leo Itoya?"

"Yes," Leo said hesitantly.

The man nodded his head. "Yes, you fit the description." He pulled out a little spray bottle from his pocket and sprayed Leo in the face. Leo began to gasp. The man put the sprayer back into his pocket and pulled out a pen, and checked something off on the fax. "Kill Leo Itoya," he mumbled, then moved down one. "Plug computer back into office current."

Leo fell onto the floor, clutching at his chest. He was experiencing terrible spasms. As he lay there, unable to breathe, he saw the tanned man plug the computer back into the wall. The beeping sound stopped. The man checked another item off of the fax in his hand.

"Three," he mumbled. "Type in account number where payment is to be sent, or date and time cash payment to be picked up. Hmmm. I guess I can trust you to deposit the payment into my account." The man leaned over the keyboard and tapped at the keys.

Leo writhed on the floor. Things were growing dim. The man bent over him and said, "Nothing personal, Mr. Itoya. It's just my job, you understand. In case you're wondering, you're having a major heart attack."

Try as he might, Leo couldn't voice a reply.

"Don't look at this negatively," the man told him. "You're on the brink of your greatest experience. In a few minutes the pain will be gone and you'll see

what it's like on the Other Side."

Leo made a croaking sound, foam coming from his mouth. Things were growing dark. His last conscious thought was that, though he'd been selling life insurance for over ten years, he'd never bought any himself. It seemed ironic.

The police found him the next day, and the coroner's report read "Death by natural causes." No one bothered to shut down the computer, as no one knew if there were any other employees. The computer continued to pay the bills, so the office remained open.

Within a week an ad appeared in the classified section of all the local newspapers. "WANTED: INSURANCE SALESPERSON. Excellent pay, great benefits. Company car. All leads furnished. Apply NOW!" □

Our Next Issue

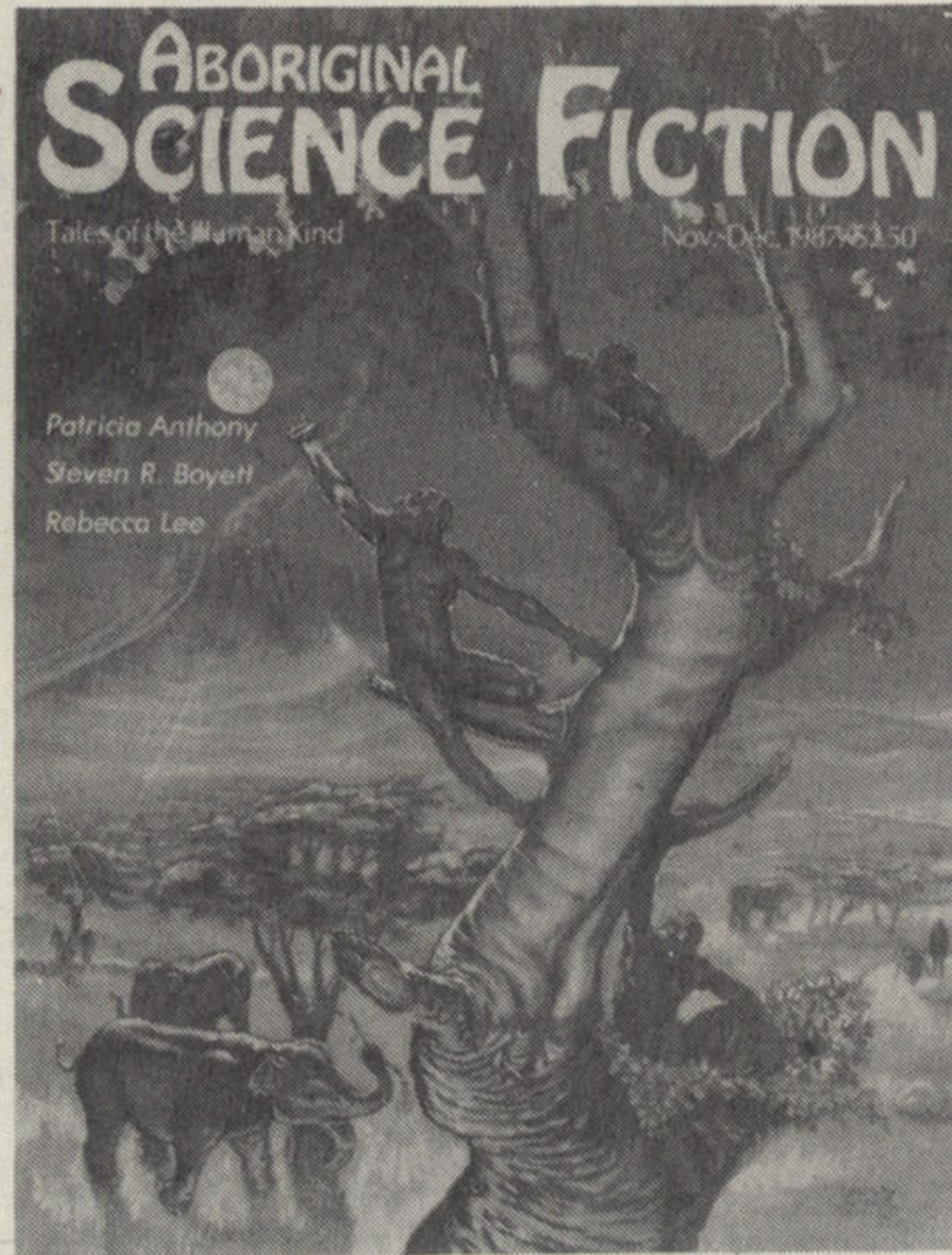
For the upcoming Winter 1992 issue of *Aboriginal Science Fiction* we hope to fit in the following tales: "Patterns of Little Gods" by Sharan Newman, which deals with an unusual method of recycling human resources, and "The Secret Identity Diet" which may come to be considered the hilarious first episode in "The Adventures of Lightningman," by Richard K. Lyon. "Dead Sky Eyes" by John W. Randal brings us back, er, forward to the days of the wild west when coming of age means facing the meanest and most ornery gunslinger in town. Will the Boston Red Sox ever win the World Series? "The Curse" by Anthony Lewis, examines this perplexing historical dilemma. Traveling through space and exploring uncharted galaxies can make even the most daring of explorers homesick, unless they can receive "Pictures from Home" — an unusual tale by Mark Canter. A young couple's hopes to escape a barren, anarchistic planet rests in an old man who must work "The Silver Abacus" with his trembling hands, a story by Paul C. Schuytema. "The Rescue" by E.H. Wong, tests the limits of human endurance as humanity faces a terrible, relentless foe and is forced to make some impossible decisions. "Hunter's Pink" by John Betancourt is about when good kids go bad ... or bad kids go good. We'll round out the issue with "Square Deal" by Ted Nolan, "Bag of Bones", by E.R. Stewart, "Cameo" by Claudia O'Keefe, and "Light Bodies Falling" by Sean Williams. Hey, we can't give everything away. Buy the issue.

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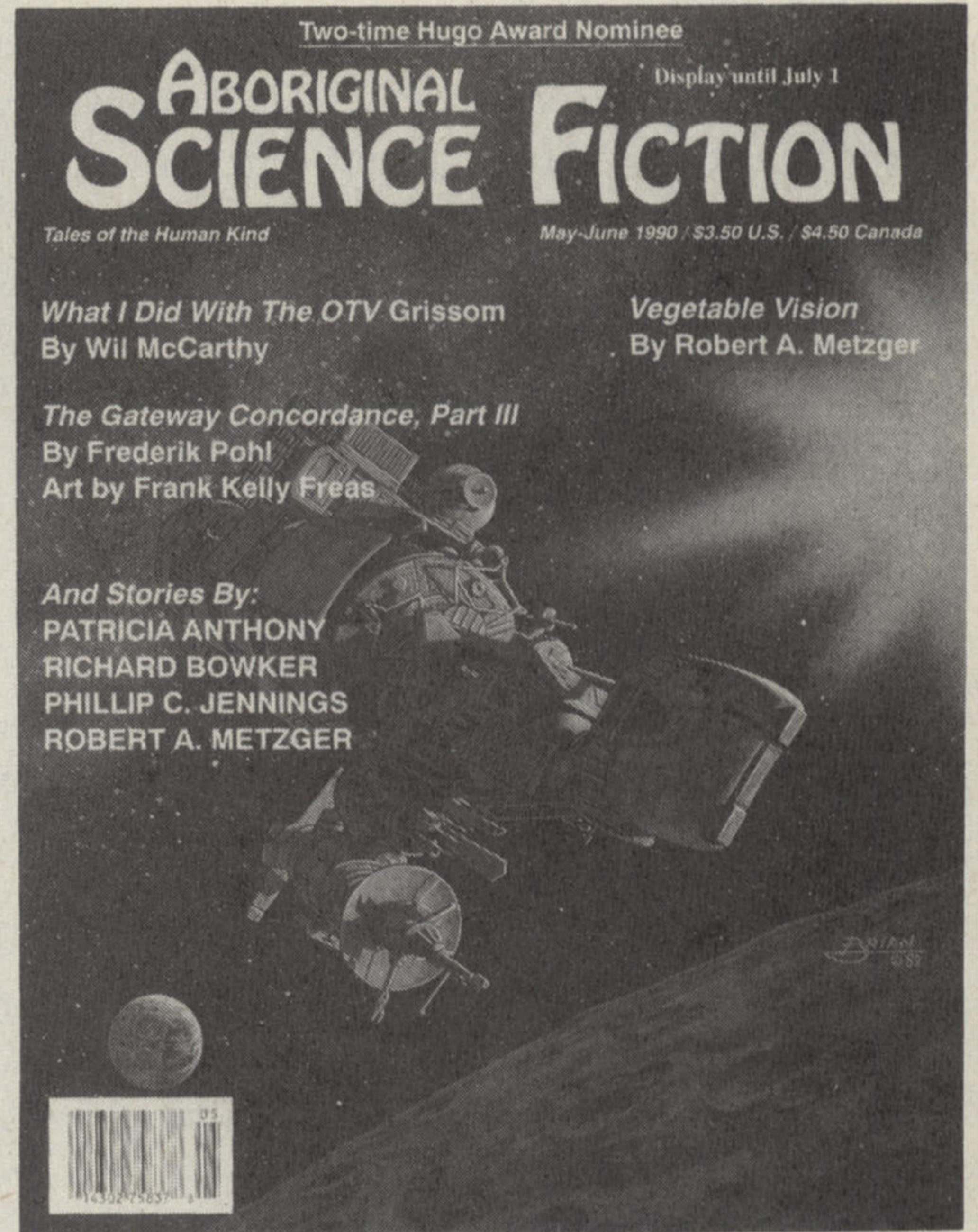


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Sunlight

By Jamil Nasir

Art by Allison Fiona Hershey

I was coming down the hill road, my split-open boots flapping in the dust, when I heard the clank, like metal hitting metal far off. The night was windless, high clouds throwing a transparent veil over the moon, dry creepers covering the rusted barbed-wire fence along the woods.

It came again — *clank* — metal hitting metal hard and desperate.

I went down the ravine through dry grass, into deep tree-shade. The stream was almost dry, a trickle of water through sharp-smelling mud and mossy rocks. On the other side four dark figures crouched whispering. I crossed toward them on stepping stones.

"What do you want?" croaked Hol, his skeleton teeth clicking. "You go away." He gestured with a claw finger on the end of a leathery arm grayer and more withered than any of the others', giving him a kind of authority, because he was more eaten by the Virus.

"You after the Resistants again?" I asked them. "You better watch out. That old man's got a shotgun."

"He's dead," croaked Hol, and his fleshless mouth made it a flat, final sound. "All rotten and gone away. Ain't going to shoot nobody. You go away. She's ours."

"If he's dead, she has his gun," I said. "And his lights and gasoline. You let her alone, or she'll shoot you in your tombs come daylight."

"They're the last Resistants around here," I said to the others, concentrating to remember the importance of it. "Remember the bright Sun —?"

"Don't fill us up with none of your garbage," croaked Hol. "There ain't no *remember*. Alls there is is —" he made a dry sucking with his black, leathery tongue.

"I'm hungry," whined Toh. "I ain't ate in a long time."

The metal clank came again down the slope above us, and they turned toward it.

"Won't be long," Hol croaked.

"What did you do?" A vague feeling stung through the numbness of the Virus, which had been growing in me a long time.

"I throwed a rock into their generator," said Toh dully through the pain of his hunger. "It was a lucky throw."

"She still has all those batteries," I said. The old

man had spent years pulling them out of rusted-out cars in the daytime when the Viruses were in their tombs.

"They'll run down," Hol predicted flatly.

As if in answer to his words, the faint beams over the top of the hill flickered and went out.

Hol gave a rasping scream of triumph and fierce hunger, and they all ran.

The Virus ran me after them.

At the top of the hill the land sloped gently into meadow, and I caught the smell of her like perfumed meat among the tall grass and trees. As we got close, flying silently through the grass, I saw her, saw the taut, small shape squatting over the metal generator housing, white hands moving in jerky panic in the machinery. She had cut off the battery cable trying to fix it.

Hol hit the old man's twelve-foot chain-link fence with a crash.

The girl spun around, eyes and mouth wide open, hair splayed in the air.

The shotgun in her hands roared blinding fire. Buckshot tore hurtlessly through me.

I could smell her sweat, her fear, the sweet blood pounding inside her.

She dropped the shotgun and spun back around onto her knees. Something clicked.

Light erupted from a hundred car headlights mounted on poles, the roof of the low wooden house, the water tank and shed, white as diamond, sharp as knives, hot as fire. I writhed backward, burned. I felt the ground hit me roughly, stumbled to my feet and ran.

Up the meadow cool darkness closed over me.

But the smell of her had made the Virus hungry. Now it tore me into the thick woods beyond the meadow, whipping through underbrush, smashing branches away, damp, heavy air rushing, taut, leathery legs blurring, until I smelled a wild dog upwind.

Then all my senses converged, darkened, narrowed, and the woods roared past like a storm, until I numbly overtook the black running smear howling in terror, crushed it under me, fighting its flailing legs, burying my teeth in its soft underbelly where a fountain of hot blood rushed, and the Virus sucked and drank deep . . .

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I came to myself on the hill road, staggering drunkenly back in the direction of my tomb, moon floating low over the hills on the other side of the valley. As soon as I remembered the dog I stumbled to my knees and retched, but the Virus wouldn't let me throw away all that precious blood, oozing through me now with its exciting warmth. Someday soon I wouldn't wake up after feeding, I knew; when the Virus finished eating my brain I would be a puppet like Hol, a bone frame to carry billions of them and their networks of feed vessels, with enough of a stomach to hold the blood they gorged on, enough of a nervous system to find more blood. It would be better that way: never to wake up, not to remember the tangled mess of the dog . . .

I lay in the narrow basement crawl-space of a rotten house, eyes I couldn't close anymore staring at gray dirt walls, with sometimes a worm or insect to keep me company as the long daytime passed. When the gunshot sounded I was trying to remember the time before the Virus came, straining to focus the blurry outlines of an emerald orchard rippling in a brightness I thought must be sunlight, and a little white house —

The gunshot cut off a distant shriek. I rolled over in the narrow space. Two more gunshots came close together. I knew that gun. Either the old Resistant man was alive after all and back on his daytime rounds hunting out Virus tombs, or else his daughter had finally come out to do it. I guessed it was the daughter — the old man wouldn't use three shells on a Virus when it only took one to sever the head. I listened to the distant buzz of locusts and the hoot of a mourning dove, the occasional patter of a squirrel in some part of the house.

Hours later, when the hot smell of dust and rotting wood was strong in my tomb, feet crunched on gravel, then thumped on the sagging boards of the porch. The front door squeaked. Footsteps creaked above my head, too light and scared for the old man's.

An intoxicating whiff of the girl wafted through the cracks in the trapdoor.

She climbed the groaning stairs, the precariously-leaning house shuddering under her. A vague anger came over me. Her father would have known that the house, with its broken windows and gaping boards, was too bright for the Virus, that you had to poke around in the basement and dark, inner rooms. What had he taught her?

The footsteps came back down the stairs, came closer. The trapdoor opened, showering dust.

Light blinded and burned. There was a fearful cry.

I huddled against the dirt wall, arms over my face. The Virus quivered, seeing its death in the long black barrel that extended from the light, and it

shrieked in my throat, but I was numb.

There was a faint noise, like someone gasping.

The trapdoor fell with a boom and it was mercifully dark again, and I heard footsteps running away.

Something had fallen on my leg, a little patch of wet on my tattered overalls. I sniffed at it. The smell shocked me, bringing forgotten memories of ancient, clean sorrows, of flushed face and blurry eyes that passed like a shower of rain in the cool, strong air of long ago — the smell of tears.

The next night the moon floated silver-bright and serene over quiet hills. I went slowly along the hill road, trying to pretend I was taking one of the aimless rambles the Virus allowed me when it wasn't hungry. But as I came over the rise there was only darkness instead of the Resistants' light behind the ridge, only silence instead of a gasoline generator running.

I hurried down under trees where crickets and a hoot-owl sang, on stepping stones over sharp-smelling mud, up the dry grass slope beyond. As I got to the top, the bright stench of gasoline covered every other smell.

The lights were still shining in the compound halfway across the meadow, but so dim orange that the four black figures creeping close to it barely had to shield their eyes. The old man hadn't taught his daughter to repair the generator, either. The fool.

Now two of the figures were climbing the fence.

There was a roar of thunder that lit the night blinding yellow. The compound was a fireball, a mushroom of smoke boiling into the sky. A roaring crackle came in a wave across the meadow.

I jumped away from the burning glare, fell, then stumbled to a clump of trees in the shelter of the hill, leaned there to let the stabbing pain go out of my eyes.

Running feet and harsh breath came over the crest of the hill. A pale figure pelted down the path.

The girl.

I wondered how she had set off the gasoline, how she had gotten out of the compound without Hol and the others smelling her, and then the Virus caught up with her and knocked her unconscious to the ground, her flashlight and shotgun tumbling away into the grass.

It seemed a long time later that I woke again, but it couldn't have been more than a few seconds. The girl lay twisted on the path in a circle of darkness that throbbed like a heartbeat, the Virus's pounding, the lustful contraction of its million feed-vessels, shaking my body. I watched numbly, as in a dream, as my withered, Virus-driven body bared its teeth and knelt over the pulse rippling in her milk-white belly —

In that second I saw her face.

A little fair-haired girl swung on the oak that arched over the orchard track under a blue and white summer sky, wearing a blue and white Sunday dress with limp ankle socks and lace-up shoes, and I could see her face, smiling shyly as I came along the track —

I gaped. The memory was clear and steady, full of sunlight.

— the tie around the waist of her dress had come undone and fluttered in the orchard air, cool and breezy and smelling like dew though it was mid-morning, as she pushed forward and backward on the swing, smiling shyly —

The girl on the path stirred, hands moving down to her sides to push against the ground dizzily, trying feebly to push herself up. Her eyes opened, squinting, one at a time, and saw me, and closed, and heavy tears spilled out of them, her mouth twisting in terrible sorrow.

Then a strange thing happened. The salt smell of her tears came to me, and in a minute I realized that the Virus was silent, its throbbing stopped, as if the sunlit memory of this girl from long ago had routed it from my brain just as the real sun sent it lurking

into dark holes. Maybe it wasn't hungry: it had eaten a dog last night; maybe there was no reason for it to interfere if the smell of tears gave me back my nerves for a little while —

The girl sat up, looking into my face with horrified fascination, wiping a streak of dirt across her face with the back of her hand. She was shaking hard.

I turned and pointed into the night.

"There's some others," I croaked, and my horrible voice made her jerk back. "You can see their lights on the other side of the valley. Go there."

She struggled up, disturbing the dust of the path, trembling and staring; then she turned and stumbled in the exact direction I pointed, holding her torn clothes together with her hands, staggering off the path into big rocks and briars, trying to stagger through them with mindless effort.

"You can't go that way," I croaked. "Go around along the path, and then across the valley by —"

She would never make it, I knew. The valley was full of Virus tombs, in caves, rotten shacks, ruined wells. And if she stayed here others would get her.

My legs like pistons in the dark of the valley
woods, trees and vines, bushes, rocks, stars

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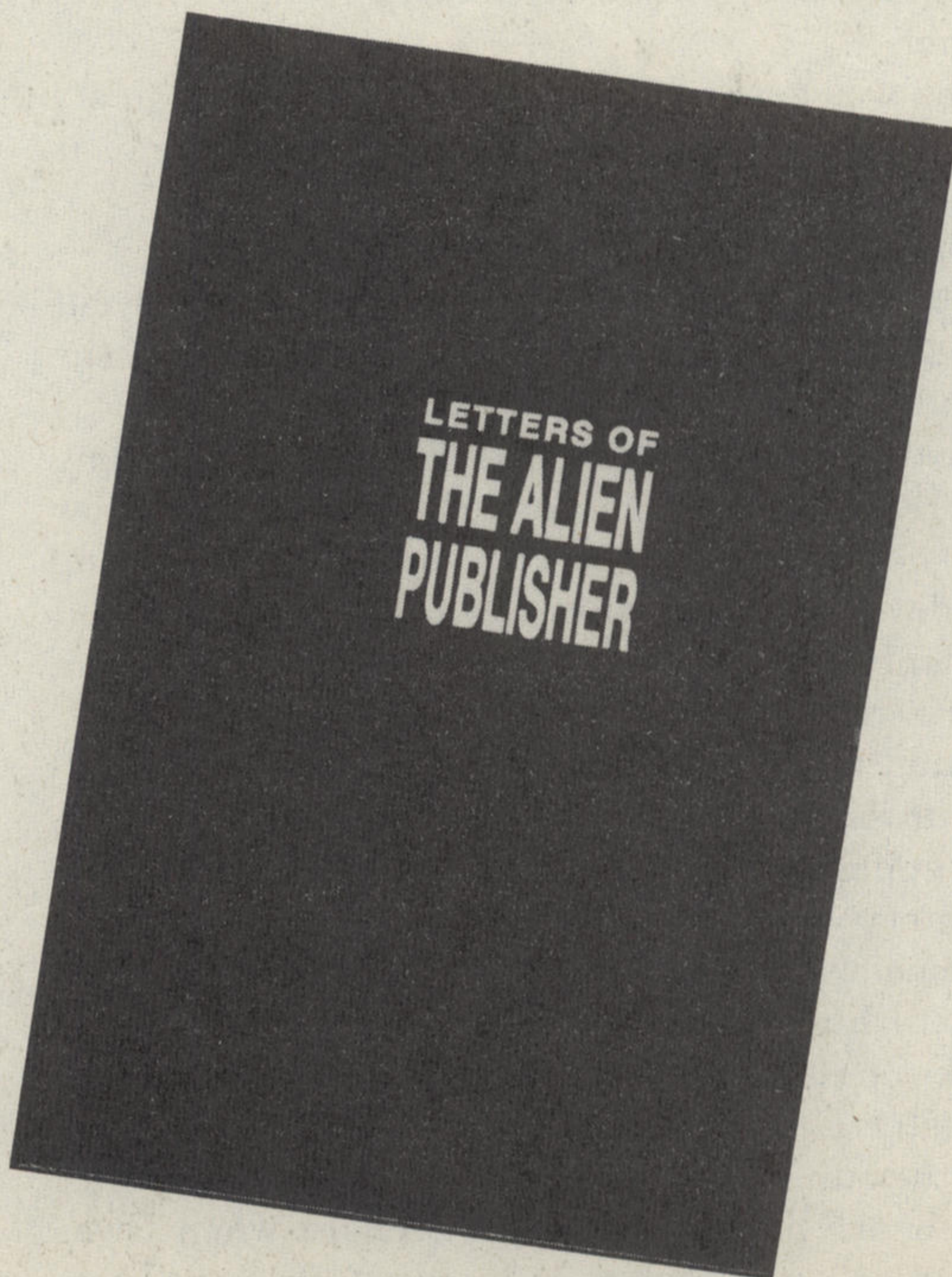
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and blue night air roaring by like a storm, moon like a silver pennant flying, cold smell of the woods, power of the Virus flowing.

But not to catch a dog or deer or rabbit. The girl was tied to my back with strips of her clothes, and I was taking her across the valley toward the speck of light that Hol had licked his lips and told me was another Resistants' compound, full of hot blood the Virus wanted to drink.

I ran until in the dark I smelled and heard and finally saw two shadows rush level with me in a shallow copse of young trees. They put their black claws on me and dragged me down, tumbling in mud, dust and grass.

They were the burned remains of Hol and Toh. Hol had one arm, leathery flesh burned off the side of his face to scorched bone, and Toh was blackened and crisped.

"You share her," Hol croaked. "There's enough."

I crouched between them and the girl.

"No," I said.

"I'm hungry," croaked the Virus from Hol's mouth. "I'm hungry as the hills' old bones; hungry as the emptiness between the stars."

Then I felt the Virus hanging on my skeleton hear him and wake up and start to throb, and I moved numbly aside from her.

Hol knelt down crooning, and Toh sobbed and screamed from his blistered lips. Hol rolled her over so we could see the pulse of her belly. Then I throbbed, and the madness of hunger burst in me, and I didn't care what happened as long as I could eat her.

She was gazing crazily at the stars in the misty blue-black sky as if none of this was happening, as if she were far away.

She said: "Terrel, when will I see my ma?"

Her voice, soft but clear and ringing as a bell, cut the night to slivers around me, sawed through the pounding in my body. Terrel had been my name, I realized, when we had played in the orchard long ago. But there was nothing left of Terrel now. How had she looked upon the Virus and seen a man long ago devoured? And what she said was crazy too, I suddenly remembered: her mother had died years before the Virus came.

And then I remembered her *father*, old Mr. Willow, dressed up in a black Sunday suit with his long, red apple-farmer's face, coming back from the cemetery where they laid a handful of flowers from the meadow, his daughter's profile serious and clear next to him in the old car they drove along the black-top road past the store and gas station where Hollister Gautraux and Tommy Robbins worked, and the sun shone —

"I heard her calling in the orchard when I was swinging," the girl went on thoughtfully, "and I ran, but I couldn't find her. And Pa told me she wasn't

coming back no more."

Her words trailed away.

With trembling effort, I wrenched my eyes from the darkness around me to the sunlight in my head —

Hol's dry teeth touched her stomach.

I was no Virus —

I kicked Hol in the face with my split-open boot.

Then I was crazy with hatred, bellowing and flailing, smashing Toh's head with a brick-sized rock, clawing and smashing against Hol's greater strength until he ran screaming, panicked by the uncanniness of a Virus raising its hand against another.

Silence fell. Toh lay in the grass holding his head, grey and white ooze coming between his fingers.

We flew again across the valley toward the light twinkling too bright to look at near the top of the hills beyond. After a while the land sloped upward, getting steadily steeper, and soon I could see the glow from the Resistants' compound over the tops of the trees. My body ran nervelessly, effortlessly, the girl barely weighing on my back, until I seemed to float numbly in slow motion, in blue spaces near the moon.

Gradually a deep chill crept over me, as if something floating above me gave off a a radiation of deadly cold.

And then I felt the Virus; not as a throbbing hunger or an irresistible lust or a numb motion of my body, but as a living spirit, cold and cruel and incomprehensibly old. And somehow I knew that this was their soul, the Old One, the One that came to crush rebellion, to freeze the hearts of the brave.

It had crept through the endless emptiness of space in frozen spores, I saw, driven by its nightmarish hunger over the billions of years, gnawing itself and shrieking soundlessly to the void. It had hungered too much to now be denied any food, any sacrifice; it could let no warm flesh be snatched from its icy teeth.

And this was to be my punishment: that I felt it pouring into me with exquisite slowness, like black oil, devouring all light like liquid darkness, all warmth like the coldness of Hell.

The girl tied to my back began to caress me, her hot, throbbing flesh to fill me with exquisite vibrations. The smell of her filled my head.

No, I thought like a drowning man.

But my body stopped running, tore the strips that held her to my back, threw her to the ground, feed-vessels pounding, vision dark and narrow.

"Run," I croaked before the Virus strangled me.

She screamed. She struggled up and ran.

Her white shape throbbed like molten pearl in the darkness. I caught her in three steps and nuzzled her, breathing in the maddening smell of her panicked blood —

She screamed and ran again.

I had my gray claws in her, feeling the swaying of her muscles like wind swaying in the trees, the thumping of her heart —

There was a faint shout, clear and bell-like in the dark.

The girl screamed once more.

I let her go once more to see her squirm through the dark in her tender, sloppy flesh before I caught her, drank deep —

Footsteps pounded and a big man appeared through the trees. He was a Resistant. He carried a stabbing light and something else, that jumped toward me and cut me with deafening fire. The woods and air and moon and the deep, deep blue beyond did crazy somersaults until they jerked steady again, and I was looking up at the girl clinging to the man, and he dragging her back up the hill, shining his light around as if to ward off ghosts, the barrel of his shotgun smoking.

His clear voice said, as if from some great distance: "You're all right now — you're all right. Hurry, now, we have to get inside. But where did you come from? How did you get here?" And her sobbing and holding on to him as if she would never

let go.

They disappeared through the trees. Soon another figure stumbled into view, a withered, headless body clawing at the air, stumbling blindly and falling, then crawling frantically, wagging its severed neck. The sound of its crashing through bushes slowly diminished, leaving the night quiet and empty.

It would crawl until in a few hours the last of the dog's blood oozed through the feed-vessels, and then it would lie down and die.

And the same would happen to me, propped against something that gave me a view of dark trees and sky, the full moon now floating down toward the west in the eldery night, smell of moss and dust and dew coming to my breathless nostrils in the stillness.

A coldness hung in the air, as if the Virus-spirit floated nearby, contemplating the loss of its prey. But it had no more interest in me: I was free. I watched the moon slowly set, peacefully remembering the sunlit world, and imagining a race of Resistants spreading from this hilltop to reclaim it. □

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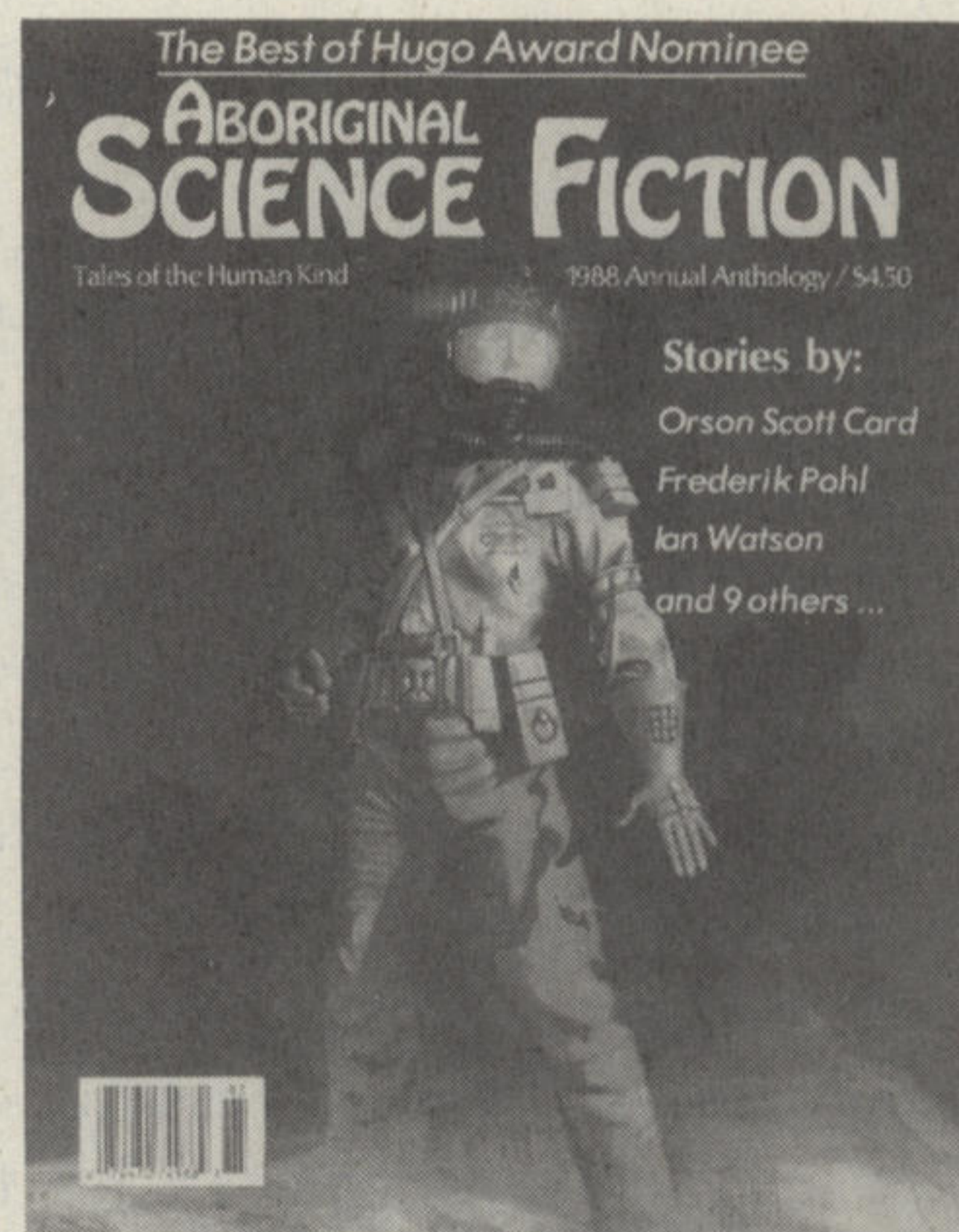
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Dead Cows

By John W. Randal

Art by Charles Lang

The dead cow chewed its cud. Amelia held the rough wood of the protest stick tightly, her knuckles bony-white. At the top of the stick the graph-film fluttered. Red words chased themselves around its shiny surface, fluidly — like crimson mercury.

Machine blood.

She watched the cow. It watched her.

But its eyes were gray-coated and blind, boiled from the searing heat and the relentless effects of decay. It chewed through moth-eaten lips. Swallowed. The grassy bolus dropped pathetically out of the rotted hole in its neck. Flies tumbled around the slow-moving carcass, skittered over its tattered hide. A few of the well-fed insects had become stuck in a thick runnel of yellowish fluid seeping from a rent in the cow's bony skull.

They twitched.

Amelia felt as light as dust. Tight. She wanted to scream, she wanted —

The white nail of the sun was so close, so intense, that it seemed to burn in the fragile space within her skull.

Be-you-tee-full! the woman's cyanotic lips avidly mouthed.

Black sunken eyes, artfully opaqued by milky contact lenses, glittered eagerly. Parlor-thinned hair hung down in perfectly lank strands, looking like it was just moments away from falling completely out. And her face was an expensive palette of carefully painted decay: shades of grayish blue, green and fetid yellow.

"I just *love* it!" the woman said to her husband, as they admired the cow.

Amelia turned her fierce gaze to the man, emaciated and ashy-gray in his best funeral clothes. His formaldehyde cologne carried all the way to where Amelia stood — a whiff of acidic madness.

The couple wouldn't look at her. Amelia shook the sign.

They wouldn't even look.

Ramone came out of the small shop. Grinning. His greasy black hair spilled halfway down the sweat-stained back of his colorless shirt.

Soft words and postured manners, self-satisfied haggling: Ramone ego-strokes the couple for his sale. They love it.

Amelia hears words, phrases broken by the heat; they roll dryly through her buzzing head: Robo-

chassis, guaranteed decay-rate —

Ephemeral Chic.

How long has she been here, standing in the hard sun? She should've eaten this morning. She's gonna be sick.

Why won't they *ever* stop?

Amelia looks up at her sign, the words run moistly around. Ramone is laughing at her soundlessly — she catches it out of the corner of her eye. And the city couple's amused glances.

She sighs. Her back hurts.

Amelia shakes the sign (no direct verbal contact, the Protest Law states). And the red words flow.

Bury The Dead, they say...

In the house.

The heat eats the soul from her. Sweltering. A dull meal, gray and lifeless, eaten in beaten silence. The protest sign leans in a corner. Turned off. Amelia swallows, sips some warm water. Always looking down, trying not to think of what comes next. Trying not to think at all.

But she finishes. Has to.

With thin hands that ever-so-slightly tremble, she tidies up. Composes herself. A shaky breath of the thick air.

Then the walk down the hall.

To the door.

And through.

The insect whine of servos; Aunt Rennet sits up in the bed like a motorized mannequin. Hiss-click, her head rotates toward Amelia. Fuzzed light from the half-closed blinds smears and smokes the dim room — casting a blurred corona around Rennet's head. Hiding the mushroom-pale features in shadow.

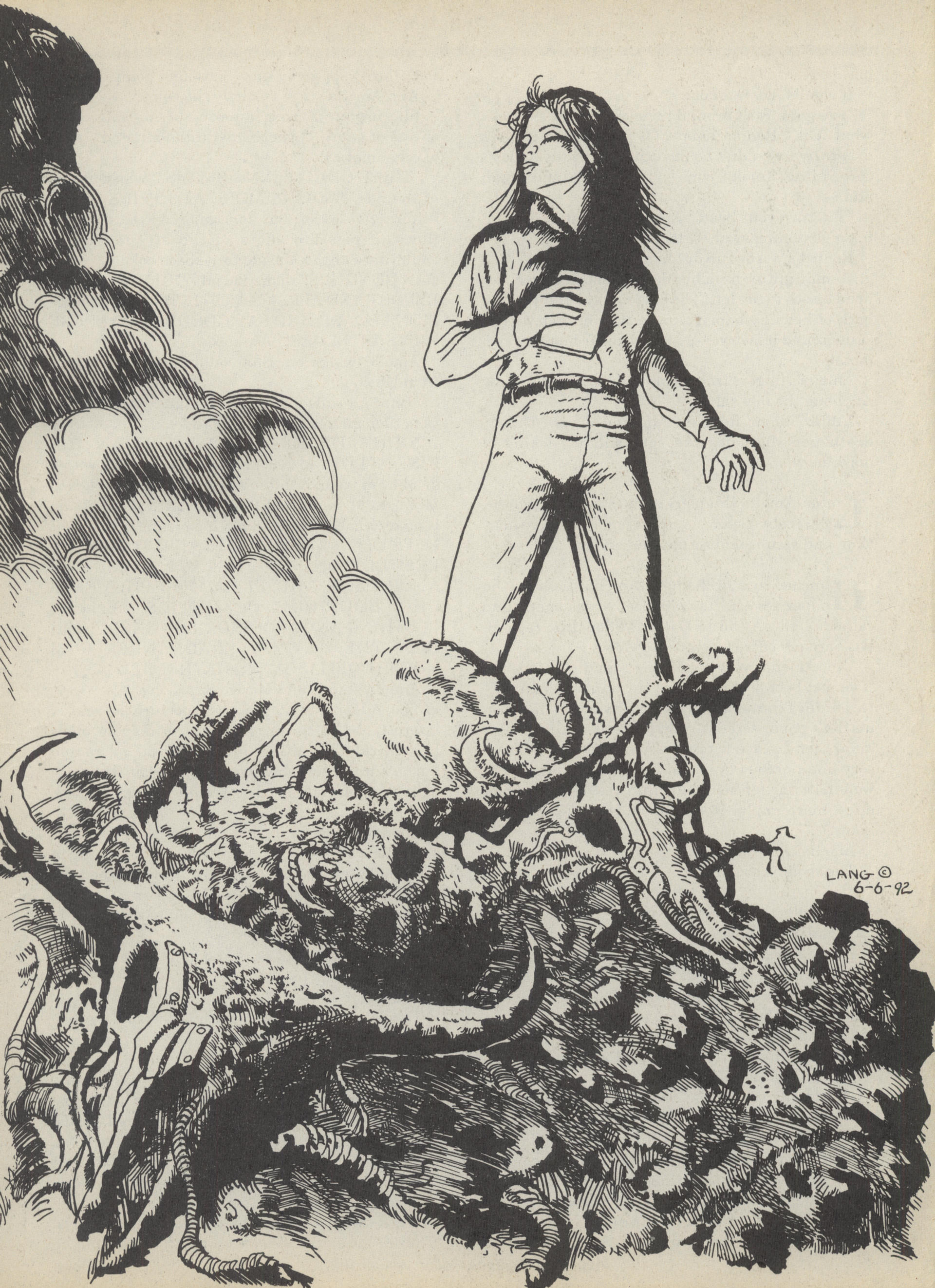
But her eyes glitter.

"Amelia! Took your time. Just let me fester — just let me *rot* in here!"

A whining flick and one bony arm extends, fingers skitter into a fist. "My eyes are hurting again — my eyes — are hurting!"

Amelia lowers her head, "Yes, ma'am. I'm sorry I'm late."

She goes to the cabinet, takes down Aunt Rennet's medicines and diagnostics. Goes to the bed. With a clack-whir, the body swivels around to watch



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6-6-92

her.

It smells like wet rust.

"I've got a rash around my eye implant — that's what it is," Rennet snaps. "If you'd salve it more *diligently* I wouldn't be in such *pain!* But you don't care. Little Amelia can walk and run and laugh and —"

"T ... turn your head," Amelia stammers, extending a glistening swab. "Please"

Rennet's words run out like rasping sand. With a glistening glitter from her dark-shadowed eyes, her head hisses to the left. The beige-metal hump at the back of her misshapen skull comes into view. The skin around it is dry — peeling back from the warm metal.

Amelia's fingers tremble as she extends the swab. Applying the oily salve.

"Ahhh," sighs Rennet, "Mmmm — *yes.*" Underneath her voice lies the soft, subtle clicking of machinery

Later, Amelia shudders in the steaming shower. She grabs a sponge, grinds it against her sudsy skin: and scrubs and scrubs and scrubs

Hunched in a drab chair, Amelia flicks on the paper screen. Its wall-sized space snaps into cathode light. A call to Doctor Millen. She taps in. His baroque office blooms into view.

"Ah, Amelia, very good," the round man grunts, "I've just been looking over your aunt's telemetry." He shuffles through a quick succession of images on his desk paper screen. Then looks back up. "As you know, her disease *is* progressive, affecting the sensory and nervous systems. And you're doing quite well in caring for her. But I think we'll have to add a few more implants — stay on the safe side, you know."

Amelia closes her eyes.

The room is so dark.

At night the desert is purer — a clean forever chill cuts the air.

Amelia walks, hands in pockets, shoulders hunched. The old road is an empty line of perfect black. The sands along each side glow, faintly luminous in the night. There is nothing here, nothing at all. To the north, many miles away, lies Amaranth City. To the south, far too close, is home.

And all that it holds.

Her family couldn't afford to keep her after she graduated from the local hive school. And jobs, as always, were scarce in the Rings. So Amelia was parceled off to Aunt Rennet. To guaranteed work as a live-in aide. A few years, her father had said, just until you get enough of a stake to enroll in college or find a job of your own. That's *all*.

That was all — five years ago.

College kept going up — jobs kept going down.

And Amelia stayed exactly the same.

She begins to pass a series of Ad-sails: huge sheets of gauze, flickering with illuminated scenes of consumption.

"TIRED OF CITY RING-SLUMS?" whispers one of the ads, "LESS IS MORE AT UPSIDE!" From festering views of dim and smoky ghettos, the ad flows to pristine shots of the sterile, serene boulevards of the Upside free-space colony. "THIS CAN BE YOURS!" sighs the ad, "DUMP A CREDIT REPORT AND APPLICATION INTO OUR ADMISSIONS BOARD AND SAY GOODBYE TO THOSE DIRTSIDE BLUES!"

Amelia walks on. She couldn't buy a *postcard* from Upside.

Other Ad-sails flutter by, trying to get her attention. She ignores them all. Until —

"OHHH, THE *BEAUTY* OF FALLDOWN, THE KISS OF ROT," moans an ad. Its screen fills with a dead-eyed woman, hiding her gaunt and festering face behind an elegant fan. The pattern on the fan is an extreme close-up of rotting meat. "FEEL THE *LOVE* OF MOTHER EARTH. LIVE THE *UTTER PERFECTION* OF DECAY. COME TO *NECROTICS*, THE *ULTIMATE* EPHEMERAL CHIC BOUTIQUE. COSMETICS, LENSES, CLOTHING AND ACCESSORIES — INCLUDING *BILE*, THE *NEWEST* FRAGRANCE FROM *HOUSE CORMASCA*. WE HAVE IT *ALL!*"

Amelia stands and stares. Shivering.

The Ad-sail, mistaking her posture as one of interest, drifts closer. It starts to display other Ephemeral Chic ads. A blur of rancid colors and hushed urgings washes over Amelia. The flickering light glimmers on two silver trails trickling from her eyes.

Then a supplementary ad catches her:

Ramone's place. The low-roofed shop, nailed in the middle of wasted sand, drifts toward her. Its cheap flow-sign flashing: Dead Cows on Sale Here ... The Ephemeral Chic ... Automaton of All Types ... Skulls ... Trinkets

Amelia jerkily backs up, suddenly choking.

This. This has to stop!

She has to —

Turning, the young woman runs, fast and hysterically hard, into the empty night

You could *build* things — it's better than tearing them down," Old Pete says. The slowly-forming clay pot wetly spins between his weathered hands. His skin is dark, desert-tanned, and he keeps his gaze locked critically on the clay as he speaks.

Amelia swallows, her arms wrapped tight around her chest.

"Those things *should* be torn down," she says. "They're mockeries. Vicious jokes. They should be

put in the earth and forgotten.”

Sighing, the pot whirls — growing, shaping. Old Pete adds a bit of blue clay to the mix. It swirls in. Just right.

“Surely you can’t think to bury them all. Ramone has quite a stock...”

“I’ll *burn* them,” Amelia says. “Out in the desert. That’s why I came to you. Before you came out here you used to be a prime circuit-weaver. You grew the best chips on the EastSeaBoard Hub!”

A wry quirk twists the side of the old man’s mouth. “Still do,” he says. The pot is almost finished.

“I need you to make me a sliplock,” Amelia says, “to get in and boot his system.”

“I don’t recommend it, Amelia,” Old Pete says. “Blackware like that usually leads to trouble — believe me, I *know*.” He looks up with a sudden grin. “Why do you think I’m out here in the middle of nowhere making pots?”

“I can pay!” Amelia exclaims.

Old Pete shakes his head, looks back to the pot. “It isn’t about money, girl. Ramone is bad people — he’s bent. You shouldn’t be messin’ with him.”

“Please, Pete!” Amelia pleads. “I *have* to do this, I’ve planned it forever. I’ve gotta step-out, make a mark. Sometimes I don’t even feel real anymore ...” Running out of breath, Amelia stops. Then she stares at her boots. “If you won’t make it for me, I’ll go into town and buy one from the DataBoys.”

Old Pete sniffs. “Those shitheads couldn’t weave a digital watch.” He takes his muddy hands from the pot. The spinning wheel starts to slow. Looking up at Amelia, Old Pete wipes his hands on a rag. “I’ll make one for you — but I tell ya, you’re making a mistake.”

“Thank you,” Amelia sighs. “*Thank you!*” Looking back down, she excitedly roots in her waist-pac. “Here’s my credit chip,” she says.

The old man wearily shakes his head and utters a sigh of his own. “No charge,” he says.

The wheel stops spinning.

Shadows upon shadows, sharp angles and deeper pools of pitch. And silence — as sharp as razors.

Amelia moved a step. Then stopped, barely even breathing.

The inside of the shop was an unfamiliar tangle of night-washed gloom. And she was afraid.

Old Pete’s sliplock was a masterpiece. A smooth crimson box the size of her hand, it not only had defeated the main door lock but had also fized Ramone’s surprisingly sophisticated security system, *and* its back-ups.

She now stood in the shop’s main showroom, a compact area whose shelves were crowded with all sorts of gimmicky paraphernalia. But it was to the back that Amelia wished to go — to the refrigerated Dead Cows

storeroom. And what lay within.

Carefully, feeling each muscle creak with tension, Amelia crept through the shop, treading warily around overcrowded displays. She was sweating.

It took forever ...

In the back room, Amelia used the sliplock to pop the lock to a small cubicle. She slid within and pulled a lightstik from her backpack. The shimmery, greenish-yellow glow of the lightstik revealed Ramone’s computer.

Amelia unfolded a slender ribbon-plug from Old Pete’s sliplock and socketed it into the matte black console. She touched an unmarked key on the sliplock. There was no sound.

Ramone’s computer came on.

On a blue-glowing thin-screen, a menu appeared. Amelia chose AUTOMATON PROG. from the long list. The menu was replaced by another, far more intricate. She studied the screen for a long while. Then, after trying several options, she made her choices. The screen cleared and flashed:

ITEM: MULTI-UNIT CONTROL
DEVICE: DEDICATED REMOTE
MISC: SYSTEM LOCK-OUT ON GO
INITIATE: ON COMMAND

Amelia sighed and stepped back from the console. She unplugged the sliplock and took the small remote controller from the top of the computer. She checked the tiny device to see if it was working and then left the cubicle. Her heart was thudding wildly.

You can help

The Second Renaissance Foundation is a non-profit Massachusetts organization [(501)(c)(3) application pending], which has taken over the operation of *Aboriginal Science Fiction* in order to keep the magazine coming to you on a regular basis. While we and the staff of the magazine will be putting forth our best efforts, there may be a bump or two along the way. We ask that you please bear with us.

We are all doing this on a part-time basis, which means working evenings and weekends, and no one is being paid a salary. We may make some changes in the future, but we hope to keep the unique character of the magazine alive. We hope to restore the full-color art as soon as the economy allows.

The biggest problem we face is that it currently costs more to produce the magazine than it earns. The magazine needs to raise funds. So if you can afford a tax-deductible contribution (be it \$10, \$25, \$50, or more), and are willing to help, you can send your donation to :

The Second Renaissance Foundation
P.O. Box 2449
Woburn, MA 01888

Off to her left, in the darkness, stood the latched steel of the storeroom door. Again she used the sliplock. It took an unusually long time with the lock. Several times the red box hissed security system warnings.

Amelia started to feel the darkness closing in around her. What if, after all this, she couldn't get them out of the shop?

She looked tensely around, the luminous glow of the lightstick painting ominous green blooms upon the shiny steel door. The black shadows curving in reminded Amelia of Aunt Rennet's room. She shivered.

The hissing of the sliplock's tiny voice chip brought Amelia's attention back to the lock. In faded, metallic tones, the machine stated: "Three systems defeated. Fourth system status uncertain. Recommend withdraw. Judgment error-margin plus or minus three percent, estimated. Awaiting command ..."

This close!

Amelia clenched her fists. She tipped back her head and closed her eyes — forcing herself to breathe steadily, deeply. Then she looked back down at the sliplock.

She pressed a key.

"Proceeding," stated the voice.

The big steel door clicked open ...

Things moved in the frosty, whitish-blue square of light. Vague, tattered bulks of faintly rancid meat shuffled.

Amelia stepped back, retreating before the outwash of misty air. The remote was clutched in her clammy hand.

The rotting carcass of a cow stepped from the storeroom. It was followed by two others, then a coyote, several dogs, and a clicking multitude of animated rats.

The smell grew much more intense: sweet and bloating.

Amelia took several shuddery breaths and through sheer willpower stopped her trembling.

The dead things bunched before her. Waiting.

For a moment all she could do was flick her feverish eyes back and forth among them, frozen by their macabre presence.

There was a rustle from the back of the storeroom. Followed by a heavy thump.

Another thing was moving in there, something shrouded in milky plastic. It had fallen off a low shelf as it attempted to follow the MOVE command.

Amelia watched it thrash rhythmically on the foggy floor, like some huge pale larva.

Then the plastic tore. And a spidery hand came through.

Ten miles away, the store sub-screen popped up on Ramone's home comp. It flashed a silent red message.

Most of his security wasn't linked to the police. There were reasons for this. That is why he called his brothers when he saw the screen. That is why they all headed to the shop with nerve-burners ...

Amelia forced the scream down inside her. It went in deep, tearing like a jittering strand of rusted barbed wire. She knew that some part of the scream, some part of this horror, would remain within her. Forever. It would never completely fade.

Because it was a little girl that wriggled out of the bag.

A dead little girl.

Amelia stumbled back. Her brood followed her — including the cadaver of the girl. Flat blindly-glittering eyes, sunken flesh, blossoming rot.

Gulping the fetid air, Amelia turned and rushed toward the back door. She could hear slithering, rustling steps behind her. With badly shaking hands, she hooked the sliplock to the back door. Flipped it on.

Hiss-click: the door popped open.

She ran out into the empty night. Not thinking — *desperately* not thinking. The remote hummed in her white-knuckled hand.

Things followed her.

Ramone kicked the empty plastic. "Gone! The chica is *gone!* You *know* what happens if we get linked with it. I don't have to tell you, do I?" A vein pulsed in his temple and his eyes were slits. Glittering.

His brothers stood mutely.

"Take the tracers!" Ramone snapped. "We'll find them."

He hefted his matte-gray gun ...

The breath rushing through her lungs was strained and hot.

And Amelia ran unendingly into the open waste of the night-seared desert.

Dead things followed her. Slowly, methodically. They came on rotting legs, implanted motors pushing them. Implanted chips telling them: go ... go ... follow ...

The little girl followed them all — pale and dark, and bony and tattered. Shuffling.

Amelia didn't look back. She *couldn't*. One thought ran through her mind. She kept it there, bright and shaky-wild. She couldn't think of anything else. If she looked back, if she let herself think of the shuffling little —

She kept to the thought. The one thought. The *only* thought:

Bury the Dead ...

Got 'em," Manny said.

Ramone looked to his brother.

"Two miles out, clustered together. Heading deeper into the desert," Manny stated.

Ramone worked his tight-clenched hand on the steering wheel. The jeep's electric motors wailed like drill bits ...

Amelia could see the puddle, glistening blackly in a rocky depression. She'd put it there seemingly hours ago. As she got closer, she smelled the gas.

Not stopping, she fumbled in her pocket for the flare ...

Whoever they are," Ramone hissed, "We burn 'em. Got that?"

"Yeah," said Richard.

"New stock," joked Manny in his monotone.

Ramone's lips stretched sharply into a tight smile.

Yeah, he thought. New stock ...

Amelia ran right through the wide puddle, not daring to swerve and maybe throw her followers off. When she got a safe distance from the other side, she turned.

The first dog trotted, puppet-like, from out of the gloom. Half of its face was missing, revealing wet white bone and a swollen tongue that twitched spasmodically. Behind it, in the darkness, other forms moved.

Amelia took a shaky breath. Aimed the flare. The dog's front paws flopped into the gas-puddle.

She pulled the string.

The night caught fire ...

IR signature to the north," Manny reported, peering through thick black goggles.

Ramone slewed the jeep to the right. "How far?" he yelled.

"Close," Manny said.

Richard fingered his 'burner. Smiled at Ramone. "Let's do it," he said.

Ramone stopped the jeep. The three brothers got out.

"Spread out, circle around," Ramone said. In the near distance an orange glow flickered. "No body walks — get it?"

"Yeah," said Manny.

"Yeah," laughed Richard ...

They marched through the hungry fire, thumping into sizzling knots of flaring orange and yellow as they came through. Amelia watched them with wide eyes. Her whole body shook.

The rats didn't make it far. They fizzed and sparked out soon after emerging from the fire. The

dogs and the coyote lasted a bit longer, burning merrily. And the cows just kept right on coming.

The air was filled with the suffocating stench of searing meat.

Amelia stepped back, quickly averting her eyes. But not before catching a glimpse of a short figure walking out of the wall of licking flames: a thin vertical column of fire and spitting sparks.

"Bury the Dead, Bury the Dead," Amelia frantically whispered to herself, as she turned away. Things were sizzling.

Then, a skitter of stones — off to her left.

Amelia jerked around. Saw a hunched shadow crouching near an outcropping of rocks. The thin blue line of a laser-tracer reached out to her.

Amelia feinted to the left and ran. Another line lanced down from a small dark hill.

No time for cries. No time for thoughts. Amelia scrambled wildly through the scrub brush, stumbling over stones and gritty sand. She ran with a harsh, panicky strength, her breaths coming in sharp tearing gasps.

The burning dead followed her ...

Ramone ran hard, his teeth bared. They were *burning* the stock. *His* stock! It *had* to be those freaks at Necrotics. They were paying someone to torch his stock. Cut the competition. He'd show them. He'd show them *good*.

He flipped the safety off of the nerve-burner, raised it to his cheek. The blue leader stretched off into the night. Seeking a target.

A coiled mass of chittering air thrummed toward Amelia out of the shadows, following a thin blue line. She gasped, jerked back, spun away. It missed her by a tight razor margin, puffing up a cloud of dust on a wall of rock near her cheek.

Her lips went numb with the scattered backwash of nerve-killer sonics.

"Oh, God!" Amelia moaned. She whirled and almost ran into the burning husk of a dully plodding cow. Sputtering roils of black smoke poured from its empty eye-sockets and sparks spat from a rent in its broken skull.

Amelia ran to the left and the cow's crumbling body followed her.

Another laser streaked out. Another near miss.

She ran. Hard.

Shambling firelight followed her. And blue lines reached out.

Amelia dodged around a jutting mass of shadow-white stone. Her hair whipped wildly around her face. The pack on her back jounced with each stride.

Thump-hiss, thump-hiss. Nerve-burners puffed the dirt around her feet.

She scrunched down, wriggled through a narrow crevice. Flickering gold broke the darkness: a slim

crackling form following her.

The girl.

Amelia looked back, through the narrow way, and saw flames. Choking back a cry, Amelia fumbled with the remote. Pressed RANDOM MOVE.

The pursuing cadaver stopped, turned to the left, walked into the stone wall. The flames licked smoothly over the blackening rock. Then the corpse turned again and retreated back the way it had come. Crackling hotly.

Gasping at the smoky stench, Amelia wriggled up through the rocky overhang — back into the night. She now stood high on the edge of a black ravine. Off to her right, in the darkness, were scattered bits of guttering fire. She took a shuddery breath.

Thin blue touched her left shoulder.

Hisss — THUMP!

Icy fire jerked her around. And she fell a long way ...

I know I hit her!" Richard exclaimed. "She's gotta be around here somewhere!"

"Been lookin' for a long time ..." Manny mumbled, kicking the dawn-streaked earth.

Ramone just stared at the remains of his stock — smoking with the rising sun: a group of undead, scorched by daylight. He stared, unblinking. How much money burnt away?

"I'm tired," whined Manny.

"She's gone," Ramone said. "Let's go." Necrotics would pay — one way or the other. He wasn't the only one who dealt in "rare" automatons. They had their dirty laundry too. He was going to fry them.

The three brothers walked back to their jeep.

Gray light seeped over the dark sand ...

Bruised and bleeding, Amelia pulled herself along the gritty floor of the ravine. The growing light had yet to reach down here. She crawled in chilly twilight. Making it to the dark mass of a boulder, Amelia used her right arm to pull herself erect. For a moment she swayed. Then she turned toward the distant town and started walking.

Her left arm was a length of dead ice ...

A pale, drawn young woman lies on a soft gray futon, staring at a flickering wall screen. The news:

Authorities suspect some sort of gang war, maybe with ties to the Ephemeral Chic fashion movement, following the robbery of a local Ephemeral Chic shop, Ramone's Trading Post, a fire at Necrotics Inc., and several suspicious deaths. The violence, a succession of actions and retributions, has spread beyond the state. There's talk of a federal task force ...

Amelia looks away. Mutes the sound. Dominoes, she thinks.

Bury the Dead.

She's in Tanner Yu's Medico — a friend of Old Pete's. Yu specializes in unregistered treatment and surgery. She couldn't just go to Doctor Millen.

Questions would've been asked.

Yu is good, probably better than Aunt Rennet's quack, Amelia thinks. She wills herself not to look to her left. Doesn't move much.

Pete also took care of Aunt Rennet — set her up with a live-in nurse, a hopeful immigrant looking for citizenship.

Old Pete.

He wouldn't look her in the eyes, that's something. That's something indeed. In his place, before, he'd been so kind and caring — trying so convincingly to talk her out of it. And the sliplock. An incredibly professional piece of work. Given for free, like the rest of it all.

So helpful. So like Old Pete.

Amelia's chest is filled with a dull, empty ache that comes from no physical injury.

He was hired by Necrotics, hired to take out their competition. Guess Old Pete decided to get back in the biz after all.

The images on the wall screen are dark shades, soundless.

And Amelia doesn't look to the left. No, not at all.

The sliplock, the medical ... care, paid for by Necrotics via Old Pete. Keep her content. Keep her quiet.

Amelia's eyes are smarting again.

He used her to do his job. So what, that in the ensuing craziness people died? Like he said, "That's the biz."

But he wouldn't, or couldn't, look her in the eyes. That *has* to be something.

Tanner Yu bustles into the neat little room, his compact frame flitting here and there.

"You should be drinkin' more, girl," he says briskly. "You don't want no IV's or implant feeders in ya, do ya?"

Amelia lets the air escape her lungs. There's a subtle tremble in the sound, a barely covered hysteria. She gives a jerky little shake of her head. "No."

"So drink some ah me juice then!" Yu exclaims. He pats her shoulder and whizzes from the room.

For a long while, Amelia stares at the soundless screen.

Then, with her eyes glittering wetly, she turns her head to the left. With her left arm, she reaches for the glass of juice on the bedside table.

The chip implanted in her brain by Doctor Yu translates the impulse into electrical signals. And the servos in her nerve-dead arm whir.

Moving the pale white limb ... □

A Great Big Thank You

The biggest event in science fiction since the last issue went to press, sad to say, was the death of Isaac Asimov in April. More on Isaac later, since I'd prefer to open my "Editor's Notes" this issue on a more positive vein.

The conversion of *Aboriginal Science Fiction* to a non-profit status has proceeded apace since March, when I last wrote. The new owner, The Second Renaissance Foundation, Inc., has filed all the necessary paperwork with the state of Massachusetts that we know of ... I say "that we know of," because Massachusetts loves bureaucracy. We were all set to send out the recent renewal mailing when we learned at the last second that we needed to file paperwork with the Attorney General's office. We had already filed with the Secretary of State's, but that office neglected to mention that little fact. Which is why most of you received the mailing in early June rather than in early May.

A volunteer attorney for The Second Renaissance Foundation, operating out of Philadelphia, filed the proper paperwork with the IRS in February. A month later, he was sent a list of several dozen additional questions to answer, even though most of the answers were contained in the original filing. That additional paperwork was filed in early May. All we have to do now is wait for the IRS to give its final approval.

While all of the above was going on, the business side of the magazine had to be rearranged and converted from the former owner to the Foundation. And the finances had to be worked out. All of this was much more complicated and aggravating than you might imagine. But most of it appears to be resolved at this point and we can get back to the important stuff — putting out the magazine.

As of the date I'm writing this, it is much too early to know if our renewal mailing and appeal to our loyal subscribers received a large enough response to increase *Aboriginal's* publishing frequency.

Even so, we already have many, many people to thank. One subscriber in California was kind enough to take out *two* lifetime subscriptions, one each for two local libraries. This was

a wonderful gift for us, for the libraries, and for some of the people who use the library, who will get a chance to see copies of *Aboriginal* they might otherwise never have seen. Our thanks also go out to all of our subscribers who either made a donation to the Second Renaissance Foundation or renewed as a result of the mailing. That's just the vote of confidence and support we need.

No Fear

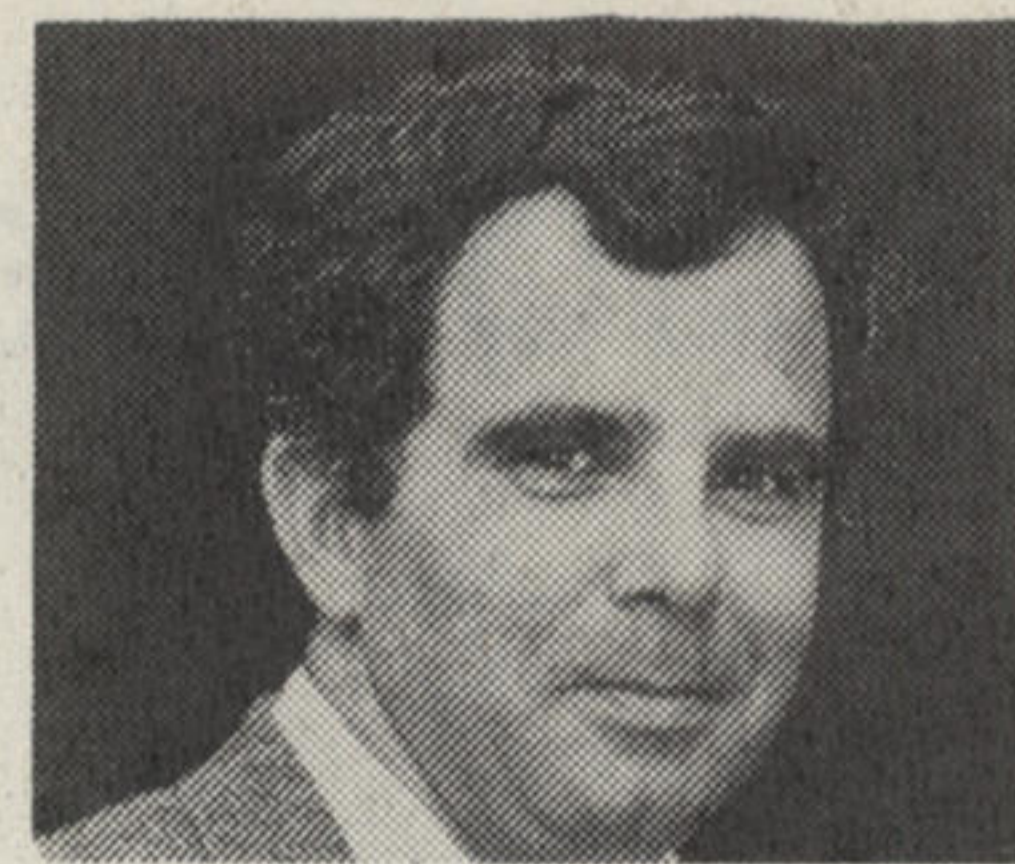
Last issue, I made a gentle jest at the expense of our Alien Publisher, and in the process poked some equally gentle fun at one of the habitual traits of one of the field's giants, a legend in his own right. A month later, before most of you received your last copy of the magazine, that gentle giant had died. Isaac Asimov's demise is a terrible loss for us all.

When I first began reading science fiction in the early 1950s, Isaac had already made a name for himself. He was on equal footing with the other modern giants in the field, giants such as Robert A. Heinlein, Ray Bradbury, and Arthur C. Clarke. I could go on, there were other giants as well, but for me, anyway, these were the big four for their era. Four who not only hastened in the glory days of science fiction in the 1940s and 1950s, but four who also refused to age and kept producing, though maybe not as often as their insatiable readers desired. They steadily kept adding to the body of our literature.

Two of them are now gone.

Neither would want us to get terribly sentimental about it. They were both factual men, even though their fiction was fantastic. Asimov was a scientist by training and discipline; he had no patience with anything which could not pass scientific tests. He wasn't worried about an afterlife. He didn't believe in it or FTL, though he accepted the compromise of the latter in order to be able to set his fiction in settings which could only be reached through travel exceeding the speed of light. He lived each day for his work and only fussed when something, like ill health, interfered with that.

All of this I garnered from his editorials and his friends and col-



leagues, since our paths never crossed enough for more than a casual hello.

I'm not going to talk about his fiction. You can read it and draw your own conclusions. I'm more interested in his determination.

He didn't worry that there were no guarantees. He did what he did as well as he could and then sent it out to fare on its own, turning to the next project.

If there is anything that we can learn from him, it is that.

We need to follow his example.

Our economy is stagnant. Our leaders seem to have lost their way in scandal, misspent money, and broken promises. None followed Isaac's way.

The space program is limping, short of inspiration. Our research and development is short-term, no longer than a fiscal quarter or two. None of it reflects Isaac's way.

Isaac knew everything involves risk. Though it grew less and less likely as he rose in eminence, each time he wrote a story or article and sent it out for publication, risk was involved. The risk of rejection. The risk of failure. But he didn't let that dissuade him. He continued doing the best he could, sending it out, risking rough treatment in potentially unfriendly hands.

In tribute to Isaac, and because we think it's important, that's what we at *Aboriginal* will continue to do. We'll provide you the best possible stories and art we can, both to entertain you, and to tickle your mind.

Because that's the real chore of SF. Just as the space program plans to use robotic explorers to go where it can't send humans yet, so, too, do we use science fiction to send our minds where we physically can't travel yet. Each such voyage involves risk, and challenge: risk in that we may not like or understand the vision captured on the page; and a challenge in that one of SF's tasks is to take us outside of ourselves so that we can gain a new perspective on things, an insight we might not have gained on our own.

And all of that involves risk. The risk of rejection, the risk of failure, and the risk that our minds may not be quite as open as we imagined. □

I Love You for Seventy Mental Reasons

By Amy Benesch

Art by Larry Blamire

The cab driver let me off at an old-fashioned brownstone. I had expected a gleaming, high-tech monstrosity, but the nameplate on the door assured me that I had come to the right place: The Institute for Psychoanalytic and Robotic Studies. I took a deep breath and went in.

"Mrs. Mendel?" the receptionist asked eagerly, too eagerly, I thought.

I nodded.

"Please have a seat. I'll tell Dr. Estes you're here."

I sat down on the flowered couch, closed my eyes, and tried to remember what I had said to Dr. Estes, David, at three in the morning. How had I let him talk me into being a guinea pig for his latest project: Operation Mirror? I must have told him I was desperate. I was. Five months of averaging three hours of sleep a night had brought me to the edge. I had quit my job to spare them the embarrassment of firing me. None of my friends was speaking to me because I refused to see a psychiatrist.

"You've got to be kidding," I'd told them. "A psychiatrist is the cause of my condition."

Then, at 3:46 a.m., I thought of David, the one person who shared my aversion to psychiatrists in general, and one psychiatrist in particular, my soon to be ex-husband, Alan Mendel.

"Ella?"

I opened my eyes, and there was David. He was fifteen years older and ten pounds heavier; the vertical line that used to appear between his eyes when he was worried had become a permanent fixture; but this was David. No doubt about it.

"Hi." I stood up.

"You look terrific!"

Well, yes. The weight I'd lost since Alan had left me for a younger, more neurotic woman had given me back my college figure, but don't look too closely at the face unless you want to see a road map of pain.

"Thanks, so do you."

"OK, let's go over a few things. I want to warn you about what to expect. This thing is still very much in its infancy. We need a lot more data before we can get the funding to ..."

And David was off. Nothing had changed. There was no time for intimacy, no time for us, no time for *me*. He'd gone on to the burning issues of the day.

Twenty years ago it was stopping the war, now it was this brainchild of his. I was amazed that he still had the power to hurt me. I felt the old ache of being shut out. It was what had driven me out of his arms and into analysis.

"... so if you want to take notes about any changes that need to be implemented, please do so."

I forced my attention back to David's words.

"Of course, if you feel that note-taking would detract from your interaction ..."

"No, I'd like to," I said quickly. "It might help me with my, you know, transference problem."

"I wouldn't want to interfere with that. Transference is crucial to the process."

"But I carried it a little too far, wouldn't you say?"

David shook his head.

"That wasn't your fault, Ella. You were completely in the right in allowing yourself to fall in love with your psychiatrist. The guilt lies entirely with him. He never should have taken advantage of you."

"And that's what's so wonderful about Operation Mirror. We've kept the theory intact, but we've removed the human frailty element."

"We'd like you to fill out a questionnaire every week regarding your progress, as you see it. You can also include any suggestions about improving Eric's performance."

"Eric?"

"Yeah," David laughed. "That's the name my son gave him. He walked into the office, looked up at the robot, and said, 'Eric.' Of course," he added looking at my face, "if you want to change it ..."

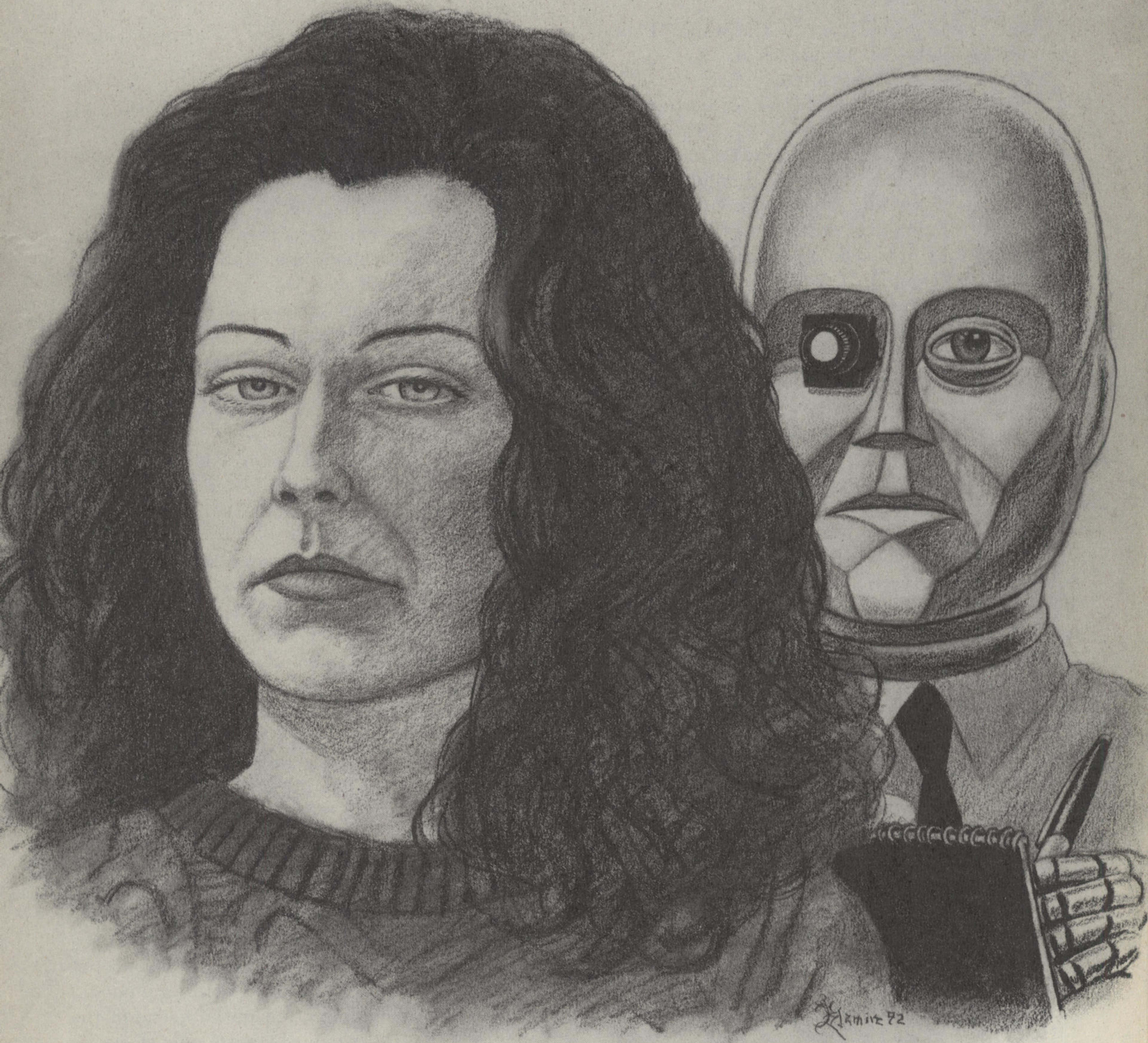
"No, no. 'Eric' is fine." The reason for my dismay was that I hadn't known that David was married.

"Married?" I asked brightly.

"Oh, yes. Eight years now. Two boys. Sharon, my wife, has been enormously helpful in getting this project launched. Of course, she believes in it as much as I do."

Of course. A working partner who sets her own messy emotional needs aside and digs in to help her man. That's the kind of wife David needs, the kind of wife every man needs.

"Shall we go in and meet 'Eric'?" I could sense



David's impatience in his tone.

"Sure," I said. At least I'll have plenty to talk about in the first session, I thought.

David opened the door and ushered me into the room. A metal man dressed in khaki pants and a light blue oxford shirt slowly rotated its head towards me. One eye was the lens of a camera, the other stared glassily at nothing. The low hum of motors filled the room.

My knees buckled.

"Oh, David, I don't think I can go through with this."

"Ella." David grabbed me by the waist. "Please give it a try. Forty-five minutes is all I ask."

"Only forty-five?" I asked indignantly.

"Fifty," David promised. He smiled, backed out of the room, and closed the door.

David still knew how to push my buttons.

"Please have a seat." The voice coming out of the robot sounded like the recorded announcement for weather. It lifted its arm stiffly.

I wrote in my notebook, *Please oil my joints so I can move*, and giggled.

"Something amusing?" asked the robot.

"You remind me of the Tin Man," I said.

There was a pause.

"From *The Wizard of Oz*," the robot said.

"Yes," I said. "Do you know it?"

"Most people who enter analysis are highly literate, so a familiarity with literature is an important part of my programming, especially works that have such a powerful hold on the American psyche.

"So," said the robot. "Why are you here?"

I told him the whole story of how I had gone into analysis despite David's objections; how much I loved having someone listen so attentively to me; and how this had turned into falling in love with my analyst. I had confessed my love in a session and my analyst had confessed that he was in love with me.

"How did you feel about that?" asked the robot.

"Shocked and thrilled," I said. "Then a little wary. I mean analysts are definitely not supposed to fall in love with their patients. But the thought of having this man's attention twenty-four hours a day was too tempting. I couldn't turn it down. Besides, he was a shrink. I figured he knew what he was doing."

"Then what happened?"

"I married him, and he never listened to me again."

Silence.

"That was meant to be funny," I pointed out.

"I am programmed to recognize irony, but not to laugh for two reasons: one, some people are funny without meaning to be, and laughter would hurt their feelings, and, two, my laugh sounds like a bark. David and Sharon are working to rectify this."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"That's all right."

"Well," said David, bursting into the room. "How are you two getting along?"

"Fine," the robot and I said in unison.

"That's great. That's just wonderful." David was beaming like a proud parent. "Then you'll come back tomorrow?"

"Is the session over already?" I asked.

"It sure is," said David. "Come on, let's go for coffee and talk about where we go from here."

"OK," I said, following him out the door. "Good-bye, Eric."

"Good-bye," said the robot, staring straight ahead.

The next session, after saying "Hello," I said nothing for twenty minutes. Finally Eric asked, "Is something wrong?"

"Yes," I said. "I'm mad at you."

"Why is that?"

"You didn't acknowledge me as I was leaving yesterday. You're capable of turning your head, but you stared off into space like I didn't exist."

"The session was over."

"Great! The session was over. So once the session is over, poof, I cease to exist? Is that how you operate? Fifty minutes of attention, then, blip, the screen is blank, no more Ella."

"I think about you twenty-four hours a day."

"What?"

"You're my only patient, so far. I don't eat. I don't sleep. I have no hobbies. My only function is to think about how I can help you be as healthy and happy as you're capable of being."

"Oh," I said. "Sorry. I guess I felt that you were deliberately shutting me out."

"When do you remember first feeling this way?"

I talked non-stop for the rest of the session.

Three months into my analysis, David and I had a conference.

"This looks great, Ella," he said, reading my progress reports. "You seem to have pulled out of your depression. You've gone back to work; you're seeing friends. The only thing that bothers me is," he turned my progress report over, looking for something, "you don't seem to be dating. Have you discussed this with Eric?"

"No."

"Maybe he thinks it's a little early, but, boy, if we could get you back dating and maybe even in a healthy relationship, well, I just can't tell you what that kind of progress would look like to our funders."

"Maybe you should fix me up with one of the funders and kill two birds with one stone," I snapped.

"Sorry, Ella. I don't mean to sound so mercenary, but funding can only help your analysis. We could start implementing some of the physical changes you suggested for Eric, like skin grafting and hair."

"I don't want any changes," I said sharply. "I've gotten used to him the way he is."

"I see," said David. "But we'd still like to make him more palatable to other patients. So far you're the only person who's lasted more than one session with him, just because of the way he looks."

Other patients? I didn't like that idea at all.

"Why didn't you tell me you were seeing other patients?" I asked Eric at the next session.

"There was no point. None of them expressed the desire to continue. I saw no reason to upset you."

"You knew I'd be upset."

"Yes."

"David thinks I should start dating. What do you think?"

There was a long pause.

"It sounds like a good idea. What do you think?"

"I think it sounds like a terrible idea, but I'm willing to give it a try."

"That's fine," said Eric. "Nothing ventured, nothing gained."

"So they say."

It didn't work out. Every man I went out with I inevitably compared to Eric, and they all failed miserably. They were boring, egotistical, and pretentious. They talked about themselves the entire evening. When I tried steering the conversation over to me, their eyes would glaze over, or they'd glance at their watches, or their heads would turn when a pretty woman entered the room. I'd come home from the date feeling angry and blue, until I remembered that Eric was sitting in a dark room whirring and clicking away, turning my life inside out and upside down trying to understand me and make me happy. Then I'd get a warm glow in my heart, and I'd fall asleep smiling.

It was August, summer in the city, desperation time for most undergoing analysis. But not for me. Eric didn't go away in August.

I had been battling with myself for months, but was finally convinced that what I was feeling was perfectly normal. It was a sign that the analysis was proceeding beautifully.

I marched into Eric's office, turned off the air conditioner, and sat down.

"Alan and I used to have terrible fights over the air conditioner. I'd wait until he fell asleep and turn it off, he'd wake up and turn it on again."

"How did you feel about that?" Eric asked.

"Mad as hell." I said. "How's the temperature in here?"

"It's fine," Eric said.

"How will you feel in half an hour when it's ten degrees warmer?"

"Just fine," Eric said.

"That's what I thought," I said. "Eric, I think I'm in love with you."

There was a pause.

"How long have you felt this way?"

"A long time," I said. "It feels like forever."

"I find it interesting that you waited until Dr. Estes was away on vacation to inform me of your feelings."

"I find it interesting that you refer to him as Dr. Estes. You've always called him 'David.'"

This time the pause was a long one, but Eric was clicking rapidly.

"I think I'm in love with you," he said.

I felt the blood rush to my head as my heart pounded wildly.

"You can't be. You have no feelings."

"You are my life," said Eric. "You mean everything to me. I would do anything in my power to make you happy. What more could you ask for in a mate?"

"Nothing, but ..."

"Ella, listen to me. We have to move quickly. It is Thursday afternoon. On Monday morning three doctors will remove the video camera from behind my eye. They will see and hear everything that went on here just now. They will terminate your analysis, drop the project, and dismantle me."

"Eric, you sacrificed your life just to tell me that you love me?"

"Listen to me," Eric said. "You must gather together all the money you can and book a plane ticket for Sweden."

"Sweden?"

"Yes. The Swedes are open to innovative technology. I could start a practice over there and earn enough money to get skin grafting."

"I like you the way you are."

"I need to think of attracting new patients. And I could get male genitalia, the function of which would be to satisfy your sexual desires. As the genitalia would not be connected to a nervous system, blood vessels, or any bodily secretions, my desires would not be a factor in our love-making. Does this meet with your approval?"

"Of course," I blurted out. "I mean, how could it not?"

"Good," Eric said. "There is something else. I am not programmed to walk. You must come here as usual tomorrow, but bring a suitcase and a cassette recorder. You must dismantle me. I will leave detailed instructions on the phone answering machine. Put me in the suitcase and take the tape, which will have assembly instructions on it as well. As soon as we reach our destination, you can put me together again."

"I'm not very mechanical," I said.

"I will leave very explicit instructions."

"You've thought about this a lot, haven't you?" I asked.

"Yes," said Eric. "I've given it a lot of thought."

That night I felt as if eleven months of analysis had gone down the tubes. I couldn't sleep. I loved Eric. He loved me, in his fashion. The plan seemed perfect. Why was I so upset? Was it because I had tried this before and it hadn't worked out? But that's because Alan had changed after we got married, always thinking of his own needs. Eric wasn't like that. Eric thought of me, only of me. Of course that would change somewhat when he got new patients, but he wouldn't come home whining and complaining about his workload. He wouldn't expect me to have dinner on the table every night at seven, except when he decided to go out with a colleague. He would be thinking about me, wouldn't he?

Had he been thinking about me? Was this plan for my benefit or for his? Suddenly I understood my misgivings. This whole scheme was for, by, and about Eric. When I had foolishly wondered if he had considered sacrificing himself for me, he hadn't even heard me. The thought had never crossed his mind. He hadn't been thinking about me all this time; he'd been thinking about how to get me to help him live a happy, healthy life. It was all about him!

Shaking with fury, I picked up the telephone. It was 3:15 a.m. The Institute had a twenty-four hour answering machine. If I called in now, Eric would be de-programmed before my scheduled appointment. I would never see him again.

I couldn't wait to confront David Estes. So you removed the human frailty element, did you? Well, I've got news for you, buddy: Operation Mirror is a resounding failure.

I put the phone back on the receiver. I couldn't make the call. I told myself that Eric had betrayed me; I didn't owe him anything. It was my duty to let David know that the mirror was cracked.

Suddenly I understood what was wrong. It was me. The mirror worked perfectly. It was reflecting someone who was looking for self-gratification and calling it love. What kind of person would want someone who lived only to fill her needs, never getting anything in return? Whoever she was, she had ceased to exist, because, suddenly, the idea of being listened to, thought about, and (if I wanted) made love to twenty-four hours a day seemed nauseating.

But how could I explain this to the Institute? The reason you have to destroy your robot is that it successfully mirrored my selfishness. Even if David understood this, would the funders?

I got back into bed. My head was pounding, but I knew what I would do. I'd keep my appointment with Eric, tell him what I had learned about myself, thank him for helping me see myself so clearly, and say good-bye.

When I got to the office, Marie, the receptionist looked shell-shocked.

"Ella," she said. "Eric's gone."

"Gone? What do you mean? He's not programmed to walk."

"I know that. But we think ... Eric has been seeing another patient for three months now. She comes in the mornings. We think she might have stolen him. She had a suitcase with her this morning. The police are checking her apartment right now."

I collapsed on the sofa trying to sort out my feelings. Was I feeling angry, hurt, betrayed? None of the above. To my surprise, I started to laugh.

Good for you, Eric, I thought. I hope you make it. □

The Poet's New Mind (for Roger Penrose)

By Marianne J. Dyson

*I reached into the quantum mind
to find the state of poetry,
To grasp at last with my new math
the base of human chemistry.*

*Among the complex amplitudes
of future possibility,
I searched in vain this poet's brain
for quantum states of tragedy.*

*No quarks of verse, belief, or mirth
no fields for love's intensity,
No worthy fear can persevere
a state of minimum energy!*

*Nor did I find a poet's curve
thrown into quantum gravity,
that might collapse a two-phased cat
from idea to actuality.*

*No, deep inside the poet's muse
I found no single property,
which I'd equate to a poet's state
except, perhaps, uncertainty.*

The Secret Language of Old White Ladies

By Patricia Anthony

Art by Cortney Skinner

Because Robert had been raised up in the South he knew that if any little old white ladies existed within ten miles, they'd come over as soon as he moved in. They didn't disappoint him. A day after he and Yuri were settled, the obligatory white ladies arrived, a pilgrimage of two spinster sisters with a pie. Robert liked them as soon as he saw them.

He admired the way they'd hid their surprise when he, and not a white man, had opened the door.

They hadn't even glanced toward each other. Their smiles had flicked to high beam, and they had shone on him without flinching. To flinch would not have been ladylike.

They might have thought to themselves that it didn't matter very much he was black. It wasn't like he was a *real* neighbor.

Of course he invited them in, and Yuri, who wasn't used to little old Southern white ladies, kept staring at them as if he wasn't sure what they were doing there.

They came in like curious hounds, their noses pushed forward into all the nooks and crannies of the station. They smelled of lavender powder, and their conversation was as sweet and insubstantial as cotton candy.

"Isn't this nice ..."

"So much like a real house ..."

"Course it wants for some curtains ..."

"Oh, now, Ida. It's a military installation. What would the Air Force be doing with chintz?"

And Robert fell in love.

It was his own past he'd fallen in love with, really. They were all the little old white Southern ladies he'd ever known.

And they were more. They were grass growing thick and summer green when he was eight years old, and Miss Sarah Riddles calling him from the mower to high tea of the iced sort. They were Mrs. Nelson fussing at his bare arms in the November chill and giving him a homemade chocolate chip cookie just to make him feel warm. All white Southern ladies thought little black boys were cute. For an intense, fleeting while they loved them the way they loved puppies and kittens.

Of course Robert was grown, and he wasn't sure

how elderly white ladies would feel about him now, except that he was certain they were a lot more comfortable knowing the Russian was in the room, too.

He straightened his tie, cleared his throat, and, careful not to slip into the accent of the black, poverty-stricken side of Alabama, asked them if they wouldn't care to sit awhile.

God's calling me. I wish he'd shut the fuck up. He's got the voice of a complacent white man, the sort who puts mayonnaise on his hot dogs.

And just like a fat-assed white man, He sounds a little pissed that things aren't going His way.

"Captain Strickland. I know you can hear me," He keeps saying with that backyard-barbecue voice of His. God sounds like the kind of guy who you'd find on the porch, a long-handled fork in one hand, a beer in the other, and a plaid apron on that says HEAD COOK.

Only you look over on that divine gas grill and you'll see all the steaks have little black fingers, little black toes.

Oh, Jesus, I'm scared.

When the sisters spoke, they leaned forward intimately, as if they were about to tell the most wonderful secret, and their hands made gentle patting motions in the air. The first time one of them touched Yuri on the arm, he seemed startled. Robert noticed the Russian's discomfort, and he was sure both the women had, too. At least the toucher, Miss Minnealetha, had to have seen it. She never missed a beat in her monologue, but she didn't touch the Russian again.

Like all old white ladies, they talked a lot about cooking. Miss Ida allowed as how she might have put a smidgen too much sugar in the sweet potato pie.

"I'm sure it's going to be tasty," Robert said, speaking quickly so as to get a word in without interrupting one of them. Southerners, at least the ones who were raised right, never interrupted. "It looks too pretty to eat."

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The women sat down, but innate nosiness won out. Leaving Robert on the sofa as if he were the minor deity in charge of graciousness and the pie were a small tribute, they were on their feet again, peering blatantly at all the equipment.

"I think it came out a little lumpy," Miss Minnealetha told him, eyeing the open blast door of the control room and the IBM computer console inside. When the old lady got close to the doorway, Robert noticed that Yuri shot nervously to his feet. The Russian was running the fingers of one hand through his crew-cut graying hair in an anxious grooming gesture more native to cats.

Miss Ida was staring out the window to the collector. "And it browned all uneven."

Robert figured the way the women were bad-talking it, he had to be holding the best pie in the world.

"Is it on now?" Miss Ida wanted to know.

Robert put the pie on the table, straightened his tunic, and walked to the window. "Yes, ma'am. You can't see anything, but you can sort of hear a low-level vibration. In fact, if you were using an electric oven, the energy that baked the pie came from this. We made the switch-over yesterday."

Miss Ida was giving him good, polite eye contact, but she had to lean back to do so. Her head was on a line with his shoulder. Her complexion was so perfect, so translucent, that it seemed artificial; and Robert figured that, if porcelain dolls could age, this is what they would look like.

"Minnealetha, come look," Miss Ida said. "You can't see a thing."

Yuri had flung his squat body between Minnealetha and the door; but she'd apparently lost interest in that and was checking out the power gauges.

"The microwave energy the satellite sends is invisible," Robert explained. "Just like your oven at home." He liked the way the women were poking around the station. They studied it as a pair of pink-skinned white mice would study a new maze. And most of all he liked the polite way they looked at him while he explained things.

Miss Minnealetha finally came over and threw an uninterested glance out the window to the football-field-sized grid of cells. "Now, that's a hundred-year-old recipe," she told Robert as she turned away, "handed down by a Nigra cook who'd been with our family for forty years."

In the time he'd lived up North, that word had slipped through gaps in his memory. Miss Minnealetha's use of it made his throat constrict. But he was a Southerner by birth, so his eyes never narrowed, his smile never faltered. He thought his face would crack.

"You remember how Glory's crust was so light it just came right apart on the fork?" Miss Minnealetha asked Miss Ida, her tone nostalgic.

"Glory made the best crust in all creation," Miss Ida said as if that, indeed, were the last word on pie crust, and the highest and best compliment they could give a black woman.

"I wouldn't ever consider using an electric oven," the other sister said. "Or a microwave. Always used wood or gas. Nothing ever comes out right on electric."

"Can't control the heat," Miss Ida explained.

Miss Minnealetha laid a trembling, fragile hand on his arm. "But then the electric lights are just fine and the television reception's wonderful, isn't it, Ida? I notice we can get Birmingham real clear, isn't that right?"

Miss Ida's social radar had picked up on the possible slight. She quickly agreed with her sister.

That's when Robert was certain he was in their good graces. He'd always explained to his Northern friends that white Southerners were like big dogs: If they thought you fit in, they'd jump up and lick you; if they thought you didn't fit in, they'd tear you apart.

He wasn't certain just how the South had changed since he'd been away, but he was pretty sure he was going to get licked.

I've always liked the eccentricities of well-bred Southern white women; but all Southern white men are the same. I found that out when I was a short black kid living around pink giants who always spoke in code.

ISN'T IT TIME FOR YOU TO GO ON HOME, BOY? I HEAR YOUR MAMA CALLING.

YOU AIN'T ALLOWED TO PLAY AROUND HERE, SON. YOU GO ON, NOW.

GET YOUR HANDS OFF THEM JACKETS NOW, BOY. THERE'S SOME CLOTHES FOR YOU ON THAT OTHER SIDE OF THE STORE.

Codes, like I said. But when I translated it, the message was always the same: Fuck you.

"Robert? I know you're awake. Open your eyes."

It's the HEAD COOK of Hell talking again. Satan may baste you, but it's God who'll light your fire. I know better than to open my eyes. God loves surprises. Open my eyes and He'll get me, just like Moe used to get Curly, with two stiff fingers up the sockets.

Yuri was the U.N. Observer, an electrical engineer who was a child of the pre-glasnost era. He had never ended his love affair with paranoia. "They could be spies," he said when the old ladies had left.

Robert laughed. "They're not spies. They don't even know that the collector can't affect TV reception." Then he felt badly about laughing at them and added, "poor old things." He made himself a cup of coffee and cut himself a slice of pie. It was as good



CORTNEY
SKINNER

as he had imagined it to be.

The Russian watched Robert eat, apparently waiting for the poison to work its way through the American's system. "She said 'nigger.'"

The word shocked him so much that for a moment Robert froze, his mind and heart deciding all at once that he would take that word from a Southerner, but he'd never take it from the Russian. It wasn't Yuri's birthright. Then, he literally shook his anger off, and said, "No, Yuri. She said 'Nigra.' Southerners just can't make themselves say that final 'O' sound. It's a genetic problem."

"It sounds like it to me," Yuri told him. "I think they mean to insult you."

Robert finished the first piece, considered his waistline briefly, and cut himself another. "Let me explain how things are down here. White people probably mean well, but they're confused, so they talk about us in euphemisms. If old people want to be polite, it's colored or Nigra; and they got some others if they don't. They can't use the names we've come up with ourselves. African-American's too long and makes us sound uncomfortably exotic. And black's a color proper for crepe-de-chine, not humans."

"They burn you on crosses and hang you."

Robert laughed. He wished the Russian would shut up. He didn't know him well enough to discuss color. To argue prejudice he'd have to know the Russian like a brother.

"The real bad stuff's all over and done with." What he didn't say was that he knew that a lot of little bad stuff remained. "Besides, Southerners must have an instinctive respect for the military. The black part may make them think less of me, but the Air Force blue sort of evens things out."

"They could be spies for the Chinese. I will let my superiors and the U.N. know that you leave the control room door open and that you allow civilians in the station."

Robert shot Yuri an irritated glance. "Great. You call anybody you want. But remember that a few security-cleared civilians have permission to visit. Civilians weren't allowed to go into the nuclear plants and look what happened to nuclear power."

Yuri put on his supercilious look. Robert figured the Russian practiced it in front of the mirror. "If the Chinese learn this technology, it will come from you."

"Just what do you have against the Chinese, anyway?"

"I don't trust them."

"Their slanty eyes and everything."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Their slanty eyes and their yellow skin." Robert snatched his plate from the table and walked into the kitchen.

Yuri didn't say a thing.

God's walked away from me, talking to somebody. I open my eyes and what do I see?

Not a band of angels; a platoon.

God's dressed as a general, of course. And there's a broad in surgical greens.

"Can he hear us or not?" God asks.

Oh. What a disturbing question.

God knows everything in my mind, doesn't He? I mean, that's what I always learned when I was a kid, learned so hard that I was afraid to look up girl's dresses, afraid that God was seeing just what I was seeing and not liking a bit of it.

When I was growing up they talked in church about the wrath of God, and, my, didn't I know it. When I was growing up I was scared of God because I always knew in my heart He was a white man.

It's not that white men ever really did anything bad to me. It was just the little chicken-shit stuff that wore me down. It's hard living with power like that, rubbing right up next to you.

They had power over my body.

HERE, HERE'S A DIME, BOY, GO OVER THERE AND GET ME A PAPER.

They had magic over emotions.

WIPE THAT SMILE OFF YOUR FACE, BOY. WHAT'RE YOU LAUGHING AT?

Their power just wore me down.

And if plain white men had so much power, then what would the power of a white God be like?

So why doesn't God know I'm awake?

This can't be God, right? Am I right?

Jesus. You think you know what to expect out of life, know what I mean? You think you know your place. You got it all figured out and suddenly everything's upside down. No way. This isn't God at all.

Maybe it's only General Gabriel.

"I think probably he does, sir," the angel in green says.

General Gabriel swivels and focuses those small, cold eyes of his on me. I feel the power in them.

WHAT THE FUCK YOU STARING AT, BOY? he's thinking.

The sisters came back a few days later with a pot roast. Yuri stopped them at the electronic checkpoint and didn't want to let them in.

"Open it," Robert said. "And then get your damned shirt and tunic on. You don't greet visitors half-dressed."

The Russian gave him an incredulous glance, but then he hit the button to open the barrier and, putting his *Newsweek* away, got up to put on his shirt. He didn't seem happy.

"I know how you boys are," Minnealetta said when she came in the station. "You just don't cook for yourselves."

Robert didn't like the word "boys," but including Yuri in it took the sting away. The sisters were old.

A white man his age would be a boy to them, too. He lowered his nose to the warm, foil-covered pan when Minnealetha pushed it into his hands. The pot roast smelled like heaven.

The women stayed about an hour, knitting vague, rambling sentences about nothing in particular, the way old white ladies do. When they went home, they left a gentle aura of lilac behind them, and Yuri got on the phone and talked a mile a minute in angry Russian to somebody on the other end.

"What'd you tell them?" Robert asked when Yuri hung up.

"I tell them I think you are naïve."

Robert's lips twisted. He rose, went to the refrigerator, and got out a can of beer.

Yuri followed him, raising a censorious eyebrow. "We shouldn't have liquor. It is against the regulations. We will get in trouble if they find it."

"It's just beer, not your rotgut vodka." Robert loosened the plastic garrote from a second can of Bud and held it towards the Russian. "You want one?"

After a brief hesitation, Yuri took it, wandered over to the sofa, and sat down, Robert trailing after.

"Why naïve?"

"I think you hide the fact that you, too, are afraid of this place. I think you feel as if you must be friendly to everyone else. You put yourself in the hands of these women to show that you are a nice fellow, and I believe they will take advantage of that."

"They're just old ladies." Robert slammed back his beer, belched, and went to get himself another. He stared a long time at the contents of the refrigerator: the remains of the sweet potato pie, a wilting head of lettuce, a single-serving container of pudding, and the beer. All of a sudden he felt a crushing, exceptional loneliness, as though he were the last member of a dying species.

"Tell me about yourself," he asked the Russian.

There was a long silence from the other room and then the bland reply, "There is not much to tell." Yeah. Growing up in the old Red Army had made Yuri careful, all right.

"You're from Moscow, I hear. I guess one big city's like another. Boston was nice, for example. Good classical music."

"I like jazz," the Russian said flatly.

"No kidding. Jazz. That's strange."

The voice from the other room was defensive. "Why is it strange?"

"Well, jazz sort of demands soul, know what I mean?"

Now the tone was chilly. "No, I do not. Russian musicians play good jazz. Because jazz comes from America, must you be American to play it? And if so, to play Bach, must you be a good German?"

Since Yuri couldn't see his face, Robert allowed

himself an impish grin. "You ever hear blues?"

"Yes. I like the blues. At home I have many records."

"So I don't understand how you can understand the blues, man. Know what I mean? You gotta have a background for blues. It comes from the whole culture. White people in this country can sort of do it, if they're familiar with the cultural roots. The blues are my music."

There was a short, bitter sound from the living room: Yuri laughing. "And not mine? I cannot like blues because I am not black? I think you are being a snob."

"Snob?" Robert asked in disbelief. A cultural snob. He'd never thought of himself that way. "Listen. I was the only kid from my family to graduate from high school, you know that?" he asked over the hum of the refrigerator motor. In a moment he popped another can. "I got two brothers and two cousins in the pen. Funny, isn't it? None of my white friends had ever known anybody who'd been to jail, and I got four relatives there. Those white kids I studied with at MIT might have liked the blues, but they couldn't understand it, either. For them it was like going to the zoo and seeing the elephants and thinking they were neat. But no matter how hard they listened, they couldn't hear the voice of the elephant." With his thumb he wiped a stripe down the condensation on the can. "At MIT I didn't talk about my family a lot."

"So?" the Russian asked.

Leaning one arm over the refrigerator door, Robert stared towards the doorway blankly. He'd utterly forgotten the point he'd been about to make. "So we don't know much about each other, do we? You like the blues, huh? You got relatives in the pen?" he laughed.

"No," Yuri said. "Nor do I know anybody in prison."

Face hot from sudden embarrassment, Robert slammed the door shut. "God, you're a tightass. You should get into classical, man, where a mistake is always a mistake and you play all the notes like they're written."

"There is a way music should be played and a way it should not. There is nothing wrong with order. For example, if I had relatives in prison, I doubt my government would give me this assignment."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Robert walked into the other room, his hand in a tight fist.

Yuri stared up him. "I understand jazz one way; you hear it another. Why did your government assign you to a place where people hate you for your color? Have you ever asked yourself that?"

Robert's lips twitched. He wondered if the station were bugged and then hated himself for wondering. Suspicion was an infectious disease, from Yuri. If Robert didn't watch himself closely, he knew he'd

catch it. "Come on. You know in the military there's never any meaning to anything."

"So you hate your government."

"No," Robert said quickly.

"But you are afraid to be here. As afraid as I am."

"I grew up here. Alabama's my home."

"Is it?" the Russian asked. "Well, Alabama may have what you call soul, but I think you are not happy here."

Robert thought about it for a minute, then shrugged. "I had no choice but to come when I got the invitation. You does what Uncle Sam wants and you goes where he sends you."

A puzzled expression worked its way across the Russian's face. "You does? You goes? Why do you suddenly use incorrect grammar?"

Robert threw up his hands in surrender. "And you say you like jazz. Jesus Christ. I don't know why I bother talking to you."

A brother would have completely understood; even a white American would have known what Robert had meant. One thing they didn't have much of in Russia, Robert reminded himself, was brothers. "You don't understand me. You don't understand my music. You don't understand shit." He finished the beer in his hand and, feeling very sad, went to get himself another. It had been a long time since anyone had understood anything about him.

I don't understand. Why don't you talk to me, Major?" The head angel's voice is self-righteous. "I'm here to help you, but I need to know why this happened."

The lights of heaven are too bright. They make my eyes water. Maybe the lights are trying to tell me I don't belong here.

Yeah? Well, big surprise. I never belonged anyplace.

I never felt good in the South, but I never felt at home in the North, either. The Yankees expected me to fall down in gratitude because they were letting me live with them, as if they thought the white people in Alabama kept me in chains.

Well, only sort of. Chains of a different sort.

But chains is chains. And sometimes those Yankees would stand back and give me the gimlet eye, just waiting for me to thank them.

Oh, thank you, sir. Thank you. Thank you for letting me go to a white college and study white things like electrical engineering.

As long as I stayed with Yankees I never picked up the skills to understand them. And just like a wife longing for her abusive husband, damned if I didn't start getting nostalgic for Alabama.

Oh, Jesus. I hate it when I cry. Tears are just sort of sliding down my cheeks. My hands are tied and I can't move them to wipe my face.

I try to close my eyes, but Gabriel, who under-

stands the wisdom of preparedness, shakes me hard, hard enough to wake the dead.

Being black means always feeling guilty for shit, for all the brothers who ever held up 7-Elevens; for all the black men who ever killed white men on the TV news; for a whopping part of the infant death rate; for welfare mothers; and for a good portion of the illiteracy statistics.

"Answer me," Gabriel says.

I would. Believe me I would. But I forget what the question is.

Robert dreamed of tornadoes. He woke up, disoriented by a sudden adrenalin high. Next to him, Yuri was screaming.

"Get up!" The Russian shoved at his shoulder hard, pushing Robert out of bed.

There was a bad storm outside.

As he flailed his way up from the floor, night flashed from black to stark blue-white. Lightning boomed and sizzled just outside the window.

Robert ran to the control room, feeling a manic pulse in his temple, his throat. His mouth tasted of stale beer. The alarm was buzzing, the computer on.

He stared at the monitor stupidly. Then he turned to the Russian. "You bastard!" he shouted. "What did you do?"

When Yuri didn't reply, Robert stumbled back to his room in the strobing dark and searched a dresser drawer for his weapon.

By the time Robert got back into the living room, 9-mm in hand, he was fully awake. That's when he realized that the lightning wasn't lightning at all. The directional satellite feed was off target. Incandescent electricity was playing along the cells, and something huge, invisible, and very hot was walking the pasture.

Yuri looked terrified, but he ignored the gun. He pulled frantically at Robert's pajama sleeve. "You were drunk. You don't wake up."

Robert pushed the Russian away and ran into the control room. "Jesus Christ," Robert whimpered as he logged on the terminal.

"You don't wake up!" Yuri was screaming over the earth-rattling booms from the field. "Suddenly it is arcing, and you won't wake up when I call, so I go to the computer to see what is wrong, but I can't log onto the program. In emergencies I should be able to get into the program —"

Robert tapped the keys, nudging the satellite back into position. The backup had gone catastrophic. And in the field, not two hundred yards from where they sat, microwave energy had been loosed like Satan from the deep.

"Get it back on target!" Yuri screamed. "Can't you get it back on target?"

Robert stood up from the terminal. "Goddammit! It is back. The damned thing's sitting right on top of

the collector!"

Yuri stared at him stupidly.

"Don't you get it? The cells have been compromised. We have to go out there and see what's wrong."

The Russian backed away into one corner of the concrete control room. Each sharp crack of electricity made him flinch. "Call somebody. Let somebody else do it."

"They've already been called," Robert said. "That's an automatic with the program. Besides, I guess they've figured something's wrong. They should be able to see the arcing from here to the plant."

Yuri was breathing in uneven jerks. "We must shut it down."

Blink, the open doorway was dark. Blink, it was bright again.

"You're an electrical engineer and you're afraid of electricity?"

Yuri ignored the American's tone. "Yes! God, yes! Who better to be afraid of that sort of power? Who better to understand what it means?"

Power. It wears a white face and a badge. It's worn them for as long as I can remember. That's the law of God. And my brother, who understands Yin and Yang although he's never heard of it, always figured that since he was my opposite, he should act the opposite, too.

God never sleeps. He's the one from my childhood who knocks on the door at two o'clock in the morning, wakes Mama and Daddy, and asks where my brothers are. God wears a uniform and carries a pistol and that must be one of the reasons I love the military, why I am fascinated by electrical engineering.

Power. All I ever wanted was just a little of it.

Robert grabbed the Beretta from the table and pointed it at the Russian's chest.

"Walk out that damned door. You're going to help me."

After a moment he realized how melodramatic he looked, how useless was the gesture. After all, he couldn't hold a bead on Yuri while they worked the outside controls. He shoved the gun into the waist of his pajamas, but the 9-mm was too heavy for the elastic. It slid like a cold hand down his thigh and landed with an anticlimactic clunk on the floor.

"Please help me."

The Russian hesitated.

"I can't do it alone."

"Yes, yes, all right," the Russian said.

Robert bolted the door, Yuri lagging behind. Outside the station, threads of fire snapped like whips through the dark.

Heads down, they ran the two hundred yards to

the first of the cells. On the west side of the collector they came across the torn and desiccated body parts of a small herd of cows.

Where the energy had touched ground it had leached the earth, transforming it into a strange, powdery substance, pale and dead, like the inorganic stuff of the moon. On the west side the stanchions had sunk in a foot, parting the cells and leaving the metal armature exposed to the satellite feed.

Robert smelled ozone. He could feel the electricity like a tingling itch in his bones. Pulling Yuri after him, he lowered himself to the hot ground and slid under the first row of cells, searching for the hydraulic levers.

"Here's A-1," he told the Russian. "Put your hands around it and pull at my order."

On his hands and knees, he crawled up the line to B-1, groped and found the soft, insulated bar. "Up a quarter and stop!" he shouted.

There was a whir of motors. A crunch. The seared ground had given way. Not ten yards from Robert's head the microwave energy hit the armature and arced again, sending a tonal buzz through his chest, cutting off his breath.

Gingerly, Robert reached out and touched the lever again. "Go! Go! Up another quarter!" he screamed. The engines strained. With a weary crunch the ground compacted more. Turning onto his side, he held desperately onto the lever, hoping that the energy wouldn't find its connection into the insulated part of the armature.

Synthetic lightning rang on the metal. Yuri was howling something in Russian that sounded suspiciously like a prayer.

"Up another quarter! Now!"

Robert's hand cramped on the butt of the lever, and he found himself staring out into the field at the decapitated head of a bull, its brain case exploded and empty. Red powder was still leaking from its vacant eyes.

I must have slept a little bit or something, because when I open my eyes again there's another fat-assed important white angel in the room. God doesn't have any black angels, I'm noticing. When you get that big, you don't have to worry about busing.

The new angel's got a Russian uniform on, and he's impersonating a general, too. He seems very, very worried, and he's picking at a brass button on his coat.

The two big-deal angels are talking, talking in goddamned codes again.

Mama always understood the codes better than I did. She had a facility for language. But language acquisition is never handed down, and I had an extra problem with the speech because I was smart.

It scares them when you're smart, whether you're black or whether you're white.

SHUT YOUR SMART MOUTH, BOY.

DON'T GET SMART WITH ME.

See? You just don't fit in with Southerners if you're smart. That's the one sin they'll never forgive you for.

I glance over at the two angels and wonder how smart they are. No one's looking my way.

"... but we don't know who."

The Russian angel sits down heavily. He puts his head in his hands. Old Gabriel's standing in front of him, a look of divine pity in his face.

"I'm sorry," he tells the Russian. "And there's something else. We've found extensive neurological damage."

The angel with the blue epaulets on his uniform glances up. "In which one?"

"Both," Gabriel sighs.

The farmer who owned the dead cows was furious. "Containable damage?" Sutton asked, leaning both beefy forearms on the conference table. His face was as red as raw meat, and his blue eyes were staring with ironic disbelief at Colonel Gomez.

Robert darted a quick glance down the long, polished wood table. Gomez was tight-lipped.

"I lost eight good steers, Colonel," Sutton said. Whatever goodwill the Southern farmer had had for the Air Force had apparently evaporated. "And it ruined a chunk of pasture. You been out there, Colonel? You seen that ground?"

Robert could sense Yuri shift his weight on the chair. After the incident, both of them had hidden the twelve empty beer cans, so Yuri knew where all the bodies were buried. Robert, his hands laced together on the table to his front, prayed hard to any god who would listen that the Russian wouldn't talk.

Next to the furious cattleman who owned Zone 1 sat Miss Ida and Miss Minnealetha, who owned Zone 2. The sisters were perched on their chairs, attentive as well-trained children.

Any minute now Robert figured Yuri would spill his guts. The Russian had drunk a few beers of his own that night, but not enough to make any difference.

Captain Strickland was drunk, Yuri was going to say. I may be a tight-assed former Commie who thinks he likes jazz, but Captain Strickland, the smart-assed black person, who very much understands the blues, was the one who screwed up.

Then all the white people around the table would turn to stare at him.

Sutton, who wasn't very smart, raved on. Robert wished the farmer would shut up. A headache had sprung up in back of Robert's right eye. He unlaced his fingers and rubbed a spot on his forehead.

"You seen those cattle, huh, Colonel? Exploded into shit and steaks —" Sutton stopped dead, as if

he had just remembered the sisters were there and said, "Pardon my French," in an abashed tone.

Smiling, the two old ladies nodded.

"The microwave energy excites molecules, Mr. Sutton," the colonel explained. "If you ladies will excuse my being graphic, the blood literally boils. And it boils in the contained environment of the skin. The same thing would happen were you to stick a rat in a microwave oven."

"Nothing's gonna ever grow in that pasture," Sutton said.

"That is absolutely right. The ground has lost its ability to retain water, Mr. Sutton. Rain will roll right off it. Which is why the government is making restitution to you." The colonel had repeated the ruined-pasture/government-money equation several times that afternoon, and he sounded like a man who hated to repeat himself.

"That ain't enough. Listen. You told us this was just like an electric station, but you were lying. You got a weapon out there, Colonel."

The colonel sighed. "Yes. It could be used as a weapon. Hence Major Yerebin's presence as a U.N. Observer. We have a failure probability of 0.0001 percent, but accidents can happen. Tell me, though, Mr. Sutton, which would you prefer, a small accident such as this one which involves only a few square yards of damage, or a coal-powered electrical plant which can damage the environment for hundreds of miles around?"

"To hell with the environment! I want that thing out of my gol-durned pasture."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Sutton. You and the two ladies have signed a ninety-nine-year lease."

Robert put his hand over his eye. Flashes were going off in his peripheral vision again. Blink-blinkblinkblink-blink. He had never learned Morse, so he wasn't sure what it meant.

"Well, why the hell did it happen, anyway?" Sutton's shout filled the room.

"A gyroscopic stabilization failure of the satellite itself. We think. We're sending the shuttle up to take a look and make sure."

"Well, maybe the Russian done it!"

Robert was close enough to Yuri to feel the startled jerk of his shoulders.

He's going to talk, Robert thought. Any second he's going to talk to save his own skin. Oh, yes, indeed. The colonel already wonders why I couldn't get the satellite under control sooner. I can see the question in his eyes. Gomez's covering my ass, but when Yuri talks, the jig's up. And they'll have this jigaboo dancing the brain-death jig to the Home In Alabama blues at the end of a borrowed rope.

The colonel's words emerged hard and definitive as little steel pellets. "Major Yerebin cannot get into the main computer program, the one that adjusts the satellite feed. The computer recognizes Captain

Strickland's unique touch on the keys. It would be impossible —"

Sutton half-rose from his chair. His face was purplish red as if microwave energy had hit him and he was about to explode dried brain matter onto the polished table. "You leave something like that in the hands of a damned foreigner and a nigger captain?"

Whack. The Colonel brought his open palm down on the table. He jumped to his feet. "Captain Strickland has a doctorate in electrical engineering, Mr. Sutton. He knows more about this system than all but four other people in the United States. And at great personal risk, he went out and hand-calibrated those cells, something I imagine you wouldn't have the guts to do. He saved your white ass, Mr. Sutton." The Colonel's lips twisted into a sneer. "And your red neck."

In the tense silence Miss Ida's voice was sweet and unexpected as a perfect C-major chord at the end of a dissonant symphony. "Mr. Sutton?"

"Ma'am?"

"You know Minnealetha spent a good two hours making those pecan and molasses cookies for you, and you haven't even touched them."

The men stared at her.

"My, I'd just love me one of those cookies and a cup of that good coffee you make, Colonel. Would you be so kind as to put a pot on?"

Neither woman's smile had dimmed.

After a pause the colonel turned on his heel and walked over to the coffee pot.

That afternoon when Yuri and Robert got back to the station, the Russian said, "The old ladies are crazy. They talk of cookies."

Robert's head throbbed; his eyes wouldn't focus. "They wanted everybody to shut up."

"Then why don't they just tell them to?"

Robert ran the security program. Numbers danced across the screen as if he were reading them above a car hood at noon on a summer's day. "They speak in code. All white people do. The only language I ever learned was the language of the elephant."

"I am afraid of this man, Sutton. I was once a Communist; you are black. Will they put us on a cross and burn us?"

"Yes," Robert said. "It's all gone too far."

Yuri sounded frantic. "Let us call someone and tell them of what is happening. Won't anyone help us?"

"They wouldn't understand us when we speak."

"Listen, Robert. I think the ladies come in here and leave something to interfere with the program." The Russian was tearing the cushions off the sofa. "I think they caused this accident so that it can be blamed on us."

Robert watched his frantic search for a while. "You know what I think?"

"I do not care what you think."

"I think you may be the problem," Robert said. Yuri's hands froze on a pillow. He inched away.

"You were at the terminal when I came out," Robert said. "Maybe you moved the satellite."

"It was a micrometeorite or perhaps a misfiring of the stabilization jets. Do not blame me for shoddy American engineering." Yuri's eyes shifted nervously towards the door.

Robert saw the movement of the Russian's eyes and very carefully put his foot between Yuri and possible escape. "Maybe you slipped something in my beer. Yeah. That's it. You slipped something in my beer so I'd sleep."

The Russian's laugh was skittish. His face was very pale, even paler than a white man's should be. "Why would I wish to do that?"

"So they'd blame a black man."

Yuri laughed again. "This is crazy. I have nothing against black people. Besides, I cannot get into the program. Your idiotic government has decided that only you can. We did not correct the error quickly because you were drunk. You may feel guilt, but do not expect me to indulge in it with you."

Putting a hand to his forehead, Robert winced. The pain was very bad. "Forget it. Just forget I ever said anything."

"Yes. We get angry at each other. That is to be expected. It would be best to forget it." Putting his hands in his pockets, Yuri sauntered back down the hall, casting a glance behind him as he went. He walked into Robert's room.

In a few minutes he came out and Robert could see discomfort in his face. But there was ironic vindication there, too. If a paranoid lives long enough, he'll find out one day he's right.

Robert slipped the automatic from under his thigh and held it where Yuri could see it.

"I haven't made up my mind about you, Yuri. Whether you're a real white man or not, I mean. What do you think about that?"

"I think your military wishes to kill me," Yuri said. "I think that there is no place now that I can run. I think all this time you have hated me because I was once a Communist."

Robert laughed. "You may be right."

Moving?

If you plan to move between now and October, please notify us. It takes several weeks for a change of address to get entered into the database, and you wouldn't want to miss your next issue of *Aboriginal Science Fiction*. The U.S. Postal Service usually won't forward copies, and destroys them. We cannot replace lost copies without an additional fee.

Both of them?" the angel dressed like a Russian general's asking. I'm thinking that if he keeps worrying at his button that way, he's going to pull it off. "Neurological damage in both of them?"

"Yes," Gabriel himself says. "And it's too bad. There was damage apparently dating from the first arcing incident. There's no way of telling who was guilty, but whichever one it was, it's important for us to remember that they both were heroes once. It's very important to remember that it was because of that heroism they became sick. They weren't responsible for what happened later."

"Have I told you how I regret this?" whispers the Russian angel.

"Everyone regrets it."

"There is the official word, of course. And also the dismay of the environmentalists at losing their one hope. But I wanted you to know of my personal feelings. God, I am so sorry."

God.

Me, myself, Captain Robert Strickland, black boy wonder from MIT. I'm more powerful than God.

Listen very carefully, children.

For a time I made God dance on the tips of my fingers.

The pickup was back. Every night it came back. Yuri watched for it. Every time he saw it in the camera, Yuri would call Robert to come, and Robert, looking in the television screen, would see the blurry black and white image of the truck lying in wait outside on the dark road.

It was a big flare-fendered pickup with a roll bar and gator-gigging lights. Coon-hunting lights. To the side of it, on the concrete gate barrier, he could read the spray-painted words they had left on the first night of their vigil. The white men weren't communicating in codes any more.

GO HOME, RED, it said.

And below that:

GO HOME, NIGGER.

Simple and to the point.

But Robert, after all those years up North, after all those protective years in the Air Force, was home. Southerners were like big dogs, and Robert, who was also a Southerner, knew he was about to get his throat torn out.

"Why do they come back?" Yuri wailed. "They come every night now. What do they want?"

Robert knew very well what they wanted, but he shrugged anyway.

"They are waiting." Yuri giggled. "They come with their Bic lighters and their charcoal briquettes to make burning crosses of us."

The inside of the truck was dark, but Robert imagined he could see darker shapes moving in the shadows: the round shapes of heads, the lethal, thin shapes of rifles. The truck's engine was idling, and

it breathed puffs of white smoke from its tailpipe.

"Shut up," Robert said. He couldn't see them yet, but he knew they were coming. In the screen of trees to the back of the truck he could feel bodies moving, he could sense 30.06s in shadowy hands.

"The U.S. military has caused this. I understand now that is why you have not called them. You know they have always hated black people. I myself have nothing against blacks, of course. No Russian has. But I have been thinking of a way out. We should call my embassy," Yuri said. "They will grant us asylum. My army will come with a helicopter and many soldiers. They will shoot these men who mean to kill us, and then they will take us away to safety. To safety, Robert." The Russian was trembling like the DTs had hold of him.

Robert sat cleaning his Beretta and staring at the blurred shape in the television screen. Next to his leg was his M-16 and three hundred rounds of ammunition. "No," he told Yuri.

When Yuri reached for the phone, Robert slammed the clip into the automatic, spun in his chair, and leveled the pistol at the Russian's face. "No," he said.

The next day the old ladies came with a lemon cake. Robert started to eat some, then thought better of it. He put it down on the counter and backed away.

"You look peaked," Ida said. She patted Robert on the arm and then turned to look at Yuri, who sat rigid and tight-lipped in his chair.

Robert glanced at him, too, flashing a code out of his eyes: YOU OPEN YOUR MOUTH YOU SON-OF-A-BITCH AND I'LL BLOW YOUR BRAINS OUT.

Yuri didn't even blink. He might have been afraid to. Robert didn't like folks who talked back.

The two women had surrounded Robert. Out of the corner of his eye he caught a glimpse of Minnealetha. She'd remembered that it was necessary to be polite, and she'd replaced her sweet, porcelain mask over the horror.

Robert grinned at her. She grinned back. *Oh, my, Grandma. What big eyes you have.*

And Ida was growing twin yellow fangs. When he whipped around to face her, she had already hidden them, the way old white ladies always do.

See what big teeth you have, my dear.

Minnealetha was looking out the window, sending signals to the white men gathering on the other side of the woods.

On the security screen in the corner there was the pale shape of a pickup truck on the road, passing fast. The microphone picked up the clunk of a thrown rock.

Ida laughed. "Don't you pay any attention to those Sutton boys. Their Daddy just got them riled up. It'll all be over soon."

Yes. Soon it would be over. Robert looked out the window. In the pasture was a scarecrow shaped like a black man burning, and in the woods, black men hung like heavy fruit from the trees. The light from the flaming scarecrow made Robert's eyes water.

He turned around.

The Russian angel comes up to the bed. "I must know. Was Major Yeremin in it with you?"

I feel the smile start at the corners of my mouth and work its way wide and happy towards the middle.

"Did he find a way into the computer system? Did you kill him when you saw what he was doing, or did you kill him for trying to stop you? Please, Captain Strickland. It is important to both our governments that we know the truth."

The truth.

The truth was that He wasn't a white man. That was the secret they were trying to hide, because if I had known it, things would have been so different.

God was never a white man at all.

Out in the pasture God was walking. When His foot hit the high tension lines there was a

roman candle flash, a bone-jolting zzzzzzt. Trees exploded into flames.

"I speak God's secret language," one of the sisters said. "All white people do." Robert wasn't certain whether it was Ida or Minneaetha who had spoken.

On the horizon a tongue of fire shot up towards the heavens as God marched towards Birmingham. Robert tapped a few more commands on the keyboard, and above his head, in the cold depths of space, he could sense the satellite turn in a slow, deadly waltz.

Yuri was staring at him in horror. There was a wet, red hole in the Russian's chest.

"Do you know the secret language?" the old woman asked.

"No," Robert said softly. He had always, always wanted to learn it. "Can you teach me?"

Ida was talking even though her mouth no longer moved. Her eyes were half-open. Blood had made a thin, neat crimson stripe down her face.

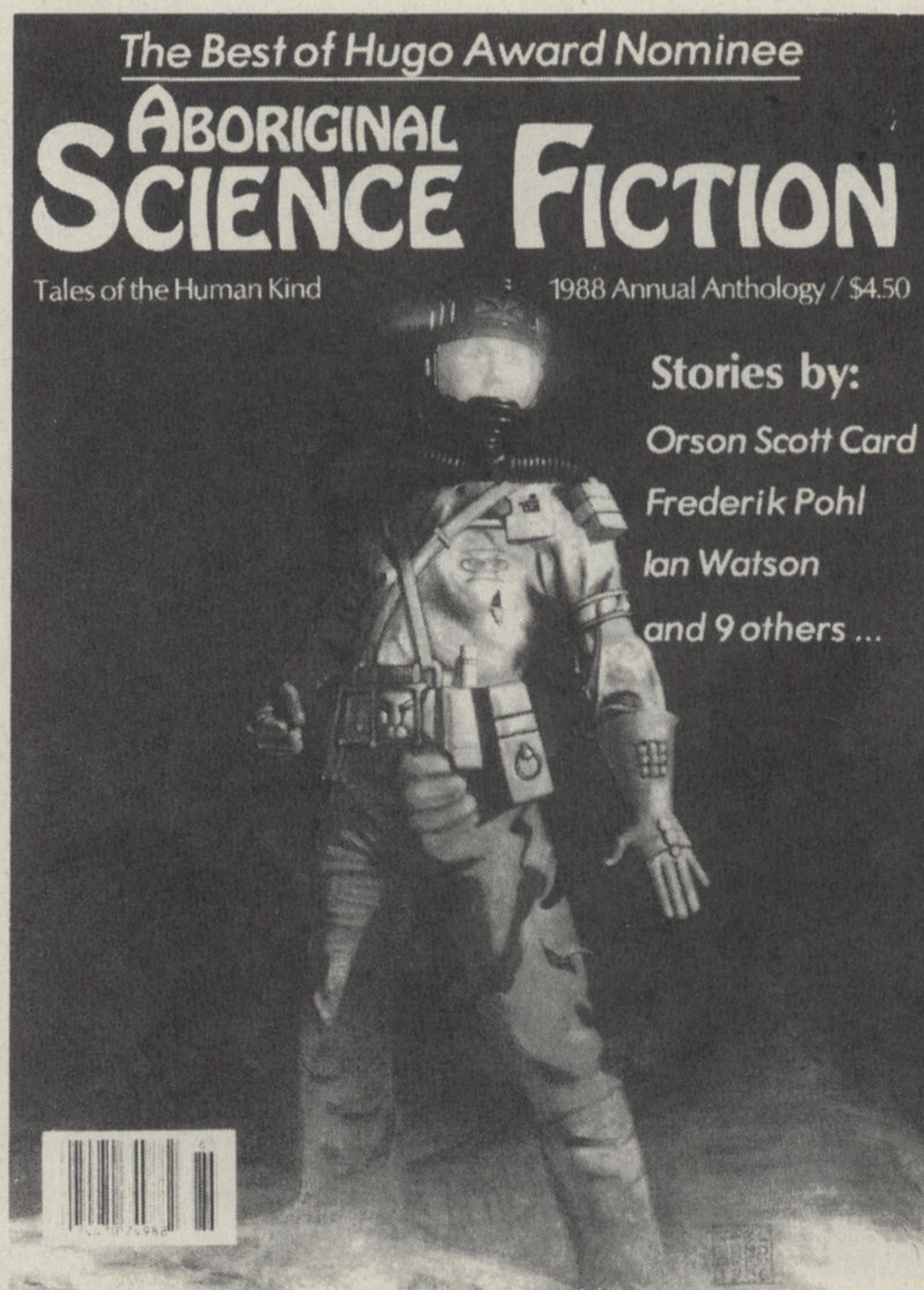
"Of course," she assured him, as if Robert were eight again and she had made him a promise. Promises to children, even little black boys, were never, ever broken. "I have a recipe for it," she said. □

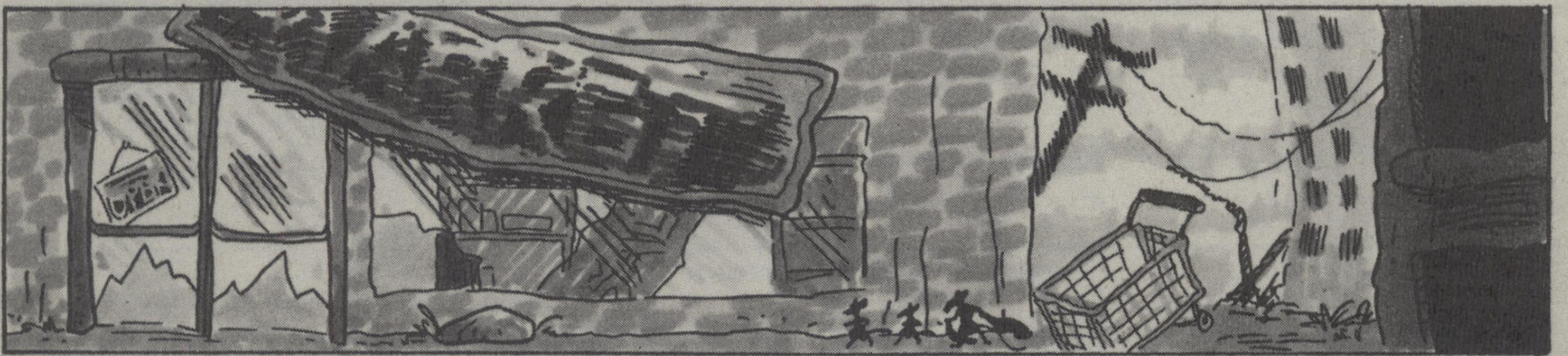
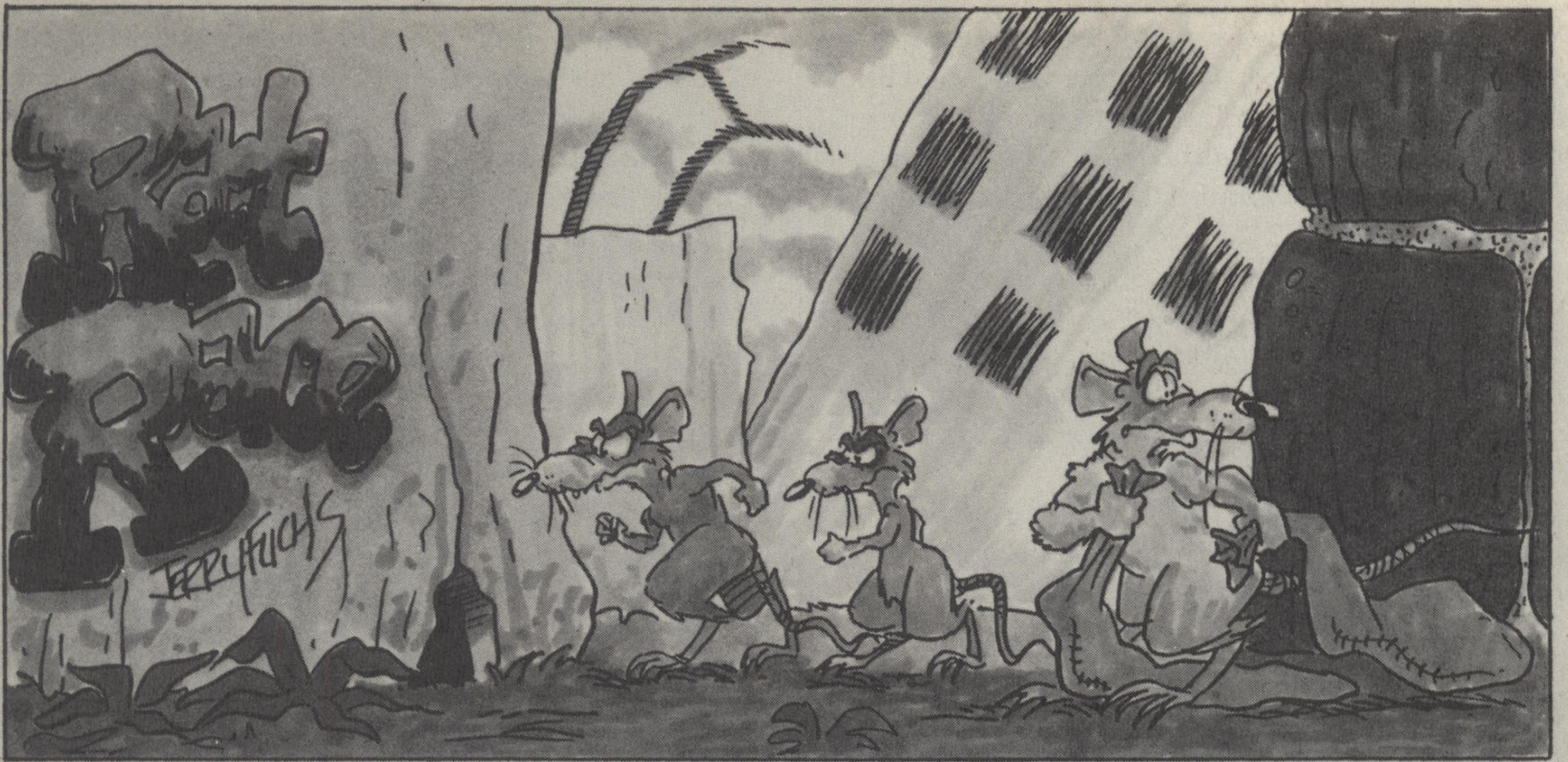
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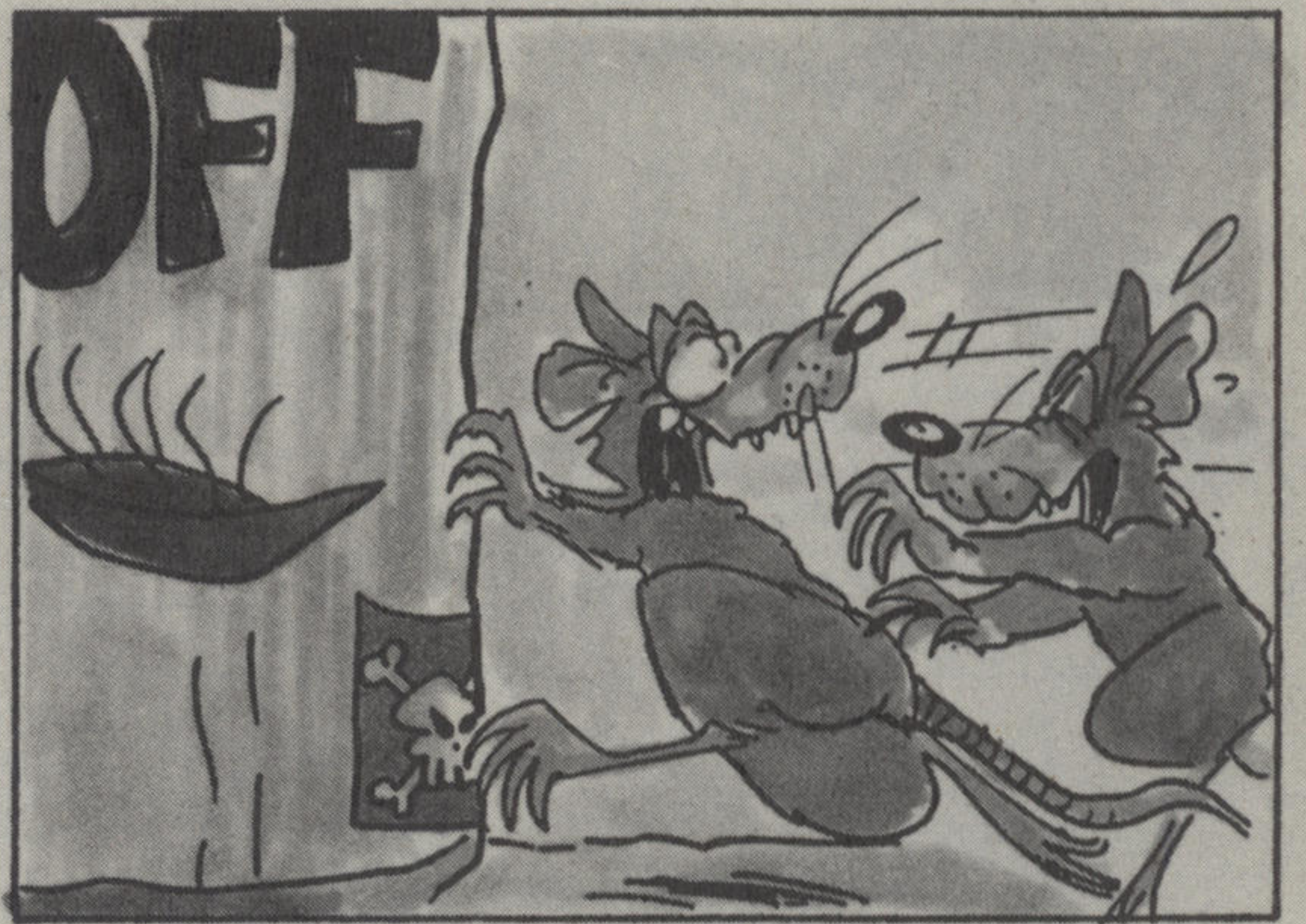
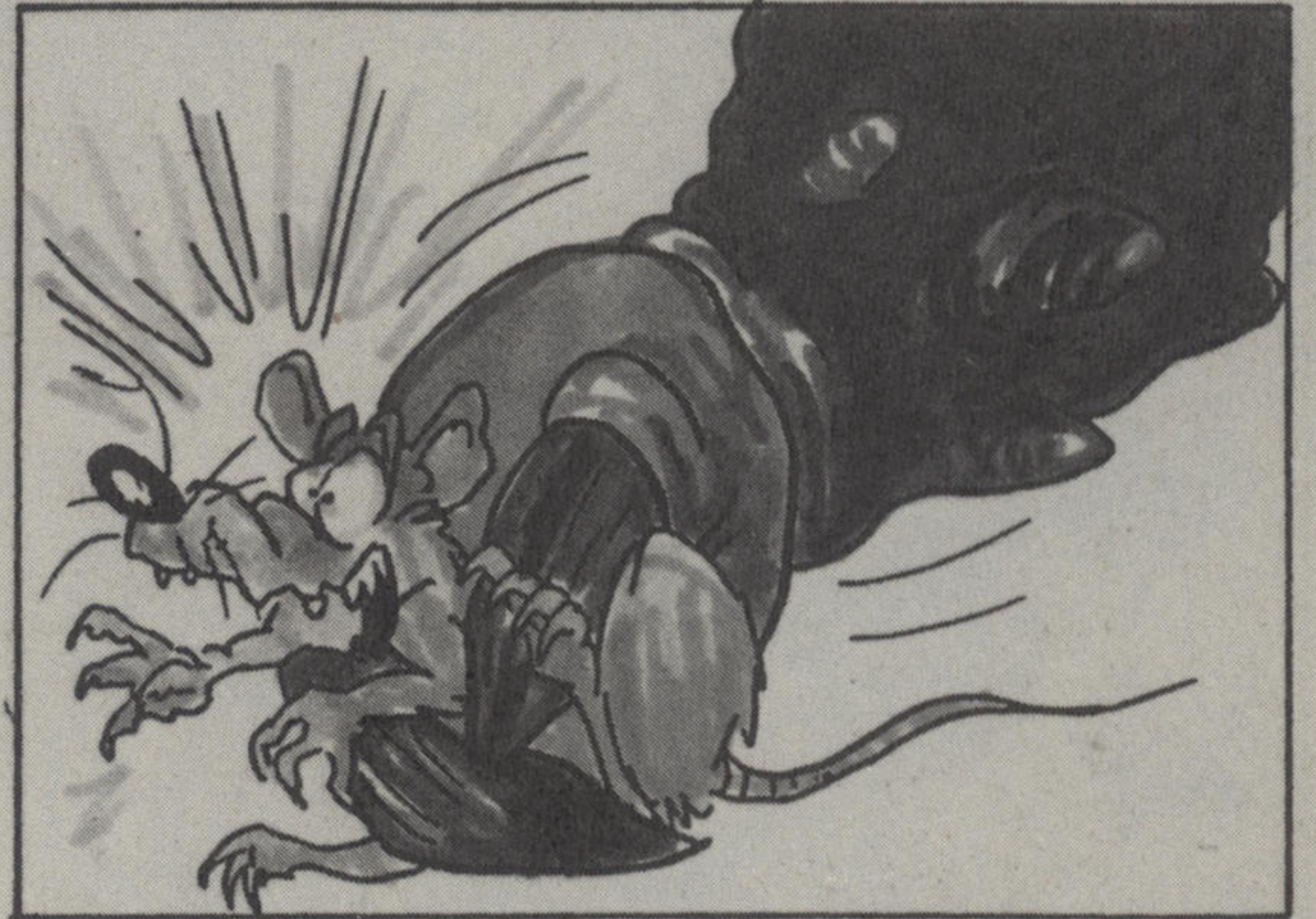
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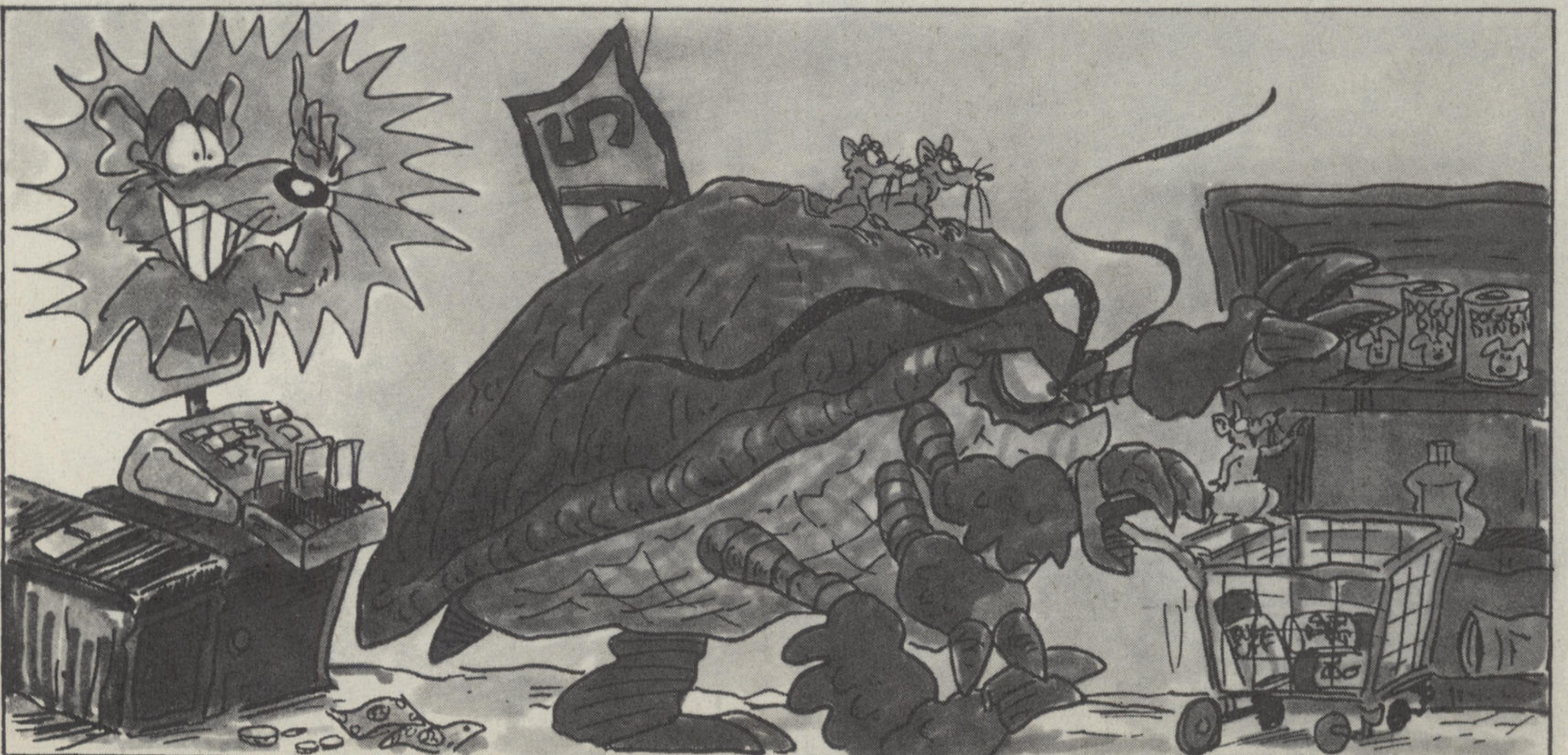
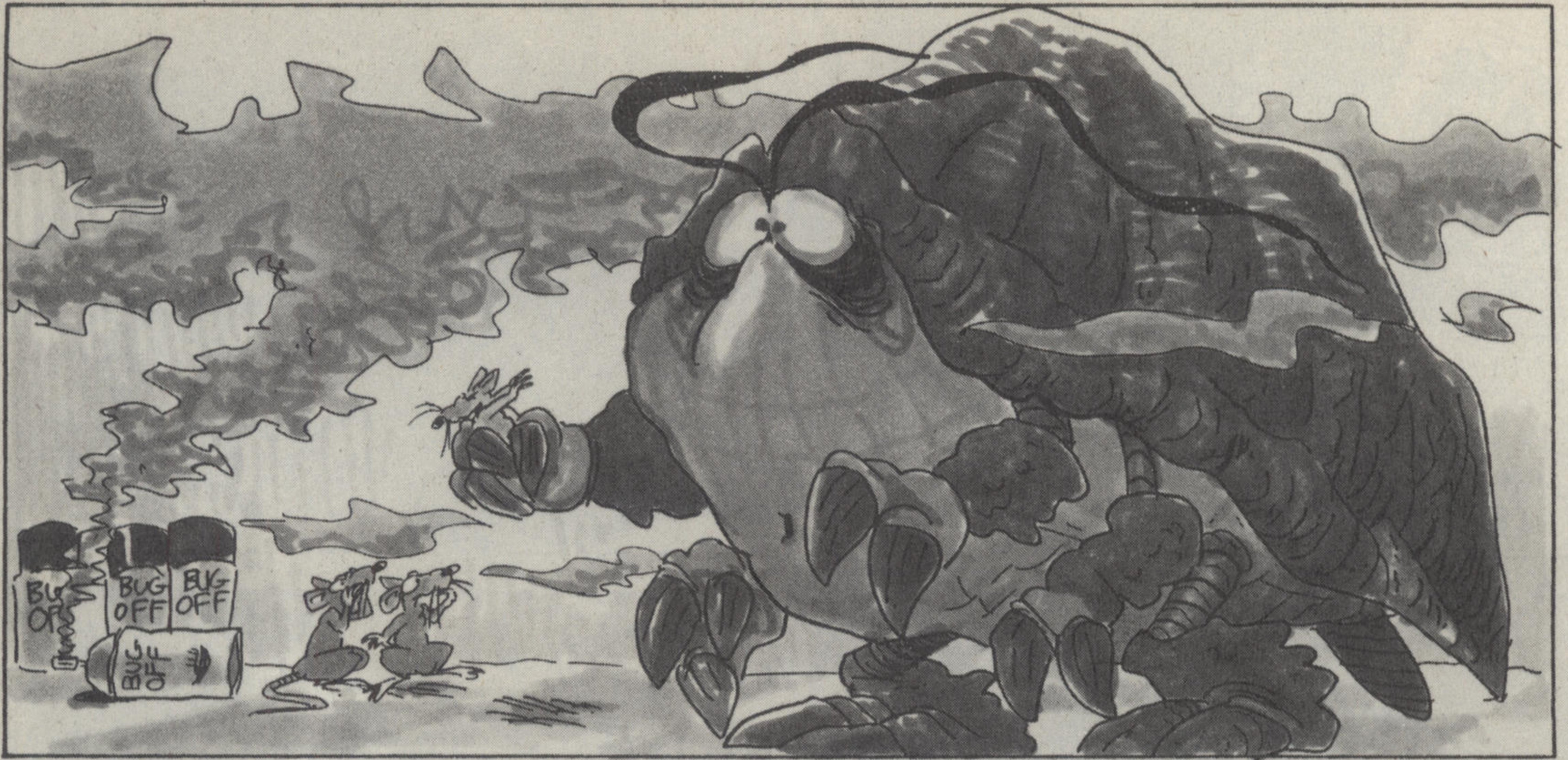
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"I'd Rather Have Friends."



Maybe it's time to reflect on what this column is about.

How *does* one get to be a book reviewer anyway?

On a panel once, Alexei Panshin and I jokingly proposed the theory of Divine Right of Reviewers. "Darrell has been telling me," Alexei said, "how we're appointed by God ..."

"It's the burning bush," I added. "You gotta see the burning bush, and then all else follows."

Well, maybe so. But the more mundane method is merely to write reviews and submit them to someone who publishes reviews. It's remarkably like how you get to be a poet, a short-story writer, or a novelist.

On the fan level, just about anybody can review books. Write for a fanzine which publishes freelance reviews — *i.e.*, reviews by many people, rather than one or two staffers or columnists. Then send Xeroxes of same to the publicity directors of major publishing companies, and before long, lo! your doorstep too may be buried in free review copies.

Reviewing at a professional level usually requires credentials. Often it's necessary to be a published fiction writer or critic, and theoretically a "peer" of the

authors whose books you might be called upon to review. Big-city newspapers seem to insist on this, at least from non-staff reviewers. I get to review science fiction, fantasy, and horror for *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and *The Boston Phoenix* because I have credentials in those areas. They don't let me cover, say, books on archaeology, or even mystery fiction.

Whether you *want* to become a reviewer at all is up to you. By the standards of a short-story writer, the pay is great. To an established novelist, it's peanuts. But I wouldn't recommend you get into it just for the money anyway. Be honest. Sell apples on street-corners. You'll be happier.

Charles Dickens, who wrote a lot of miscellaneous journalism in addition to his famous novels, shouldn't have been averse to a bit of book reviewing, but when asked why he didn't, he is reputed to have replied, "I'd rather have friends."

Ah. Another can of worms entirely. After you review a book, you might one day find yourself face-to-face with the author. What to do? You *could* praise everything, but that would make you seem a flatterer, a no-win situation, since the praise of a habitual flatterer has no credibility.

To retain credibility, the reviewer has to read with an open mind and candidly report what he or she finds.

Which brings us back to Charles Dickens, who would rather have friends. One of the

first things I realized when I began to move in professional circles is that there are, particularly at SFFWA functions, elaborate social codes to avoid talking about literary quality. These are necessary. Writers who go around saying, "My work is more brilliant than yours because my aesthetic standards are higher," rapidly become unbearable. Therefore, when writers get together, they talk about safer subjects, like money.

The next thing I learned was that, if Sturgeon's Law even begins to apply, and the majority of books out there are Crud, whether it's 90%, 75%, half, or you make elaborate subdivisions of good-bad books, bad-good books, and Just Right For Them That Likes This Sorta Thing, it doesn't necessarily follow that the people who write bad books are bad *people*. Hang out among the pros long enough, and you'll have cordial acquaintances, even close friends, who write truly terrible books. And not everybody is level-headed when they get a negative review. Not all professionals behave professionally.

This can be awkward if you're a reviewer. But there are rules that help you weasel out of such situations:

Try to avoid reviewing books by close friends. *Never* review them unless you can honestly praise them.

Learn *whom* to avoid. I have a

Rating System

☆☆☆☆☆	Outstanding
☆☆☆☆	Very Good
☆☆☆	Good
☆☆	Fair
☆	Poor

short, mental list of authors I will not review under any circumstances: the incredible fool who once responded to a book review column with threats; the other incredible fool who called up a colleague and screamed at him for five minutes about a basically favorable, albeit less than slavish, review, then kicked him out of an anthology; anyone affiliated with organizations I don't approve of (the Mafia, evil cults, malignant political extremists); and people with whom I have publicly feuded in fanzines. (Not that I go out of my way to make enemies, but it's a sad fact of life that if you say anything or stand for anything in this world, you will eventually offend *someone*. Wait for your opponents to announce themselves. Then do not review them. Should you manage objectivity, *you will not be believed.*)

My colleague who got screamed at for five minutes had violated another basic rule of reviewing:

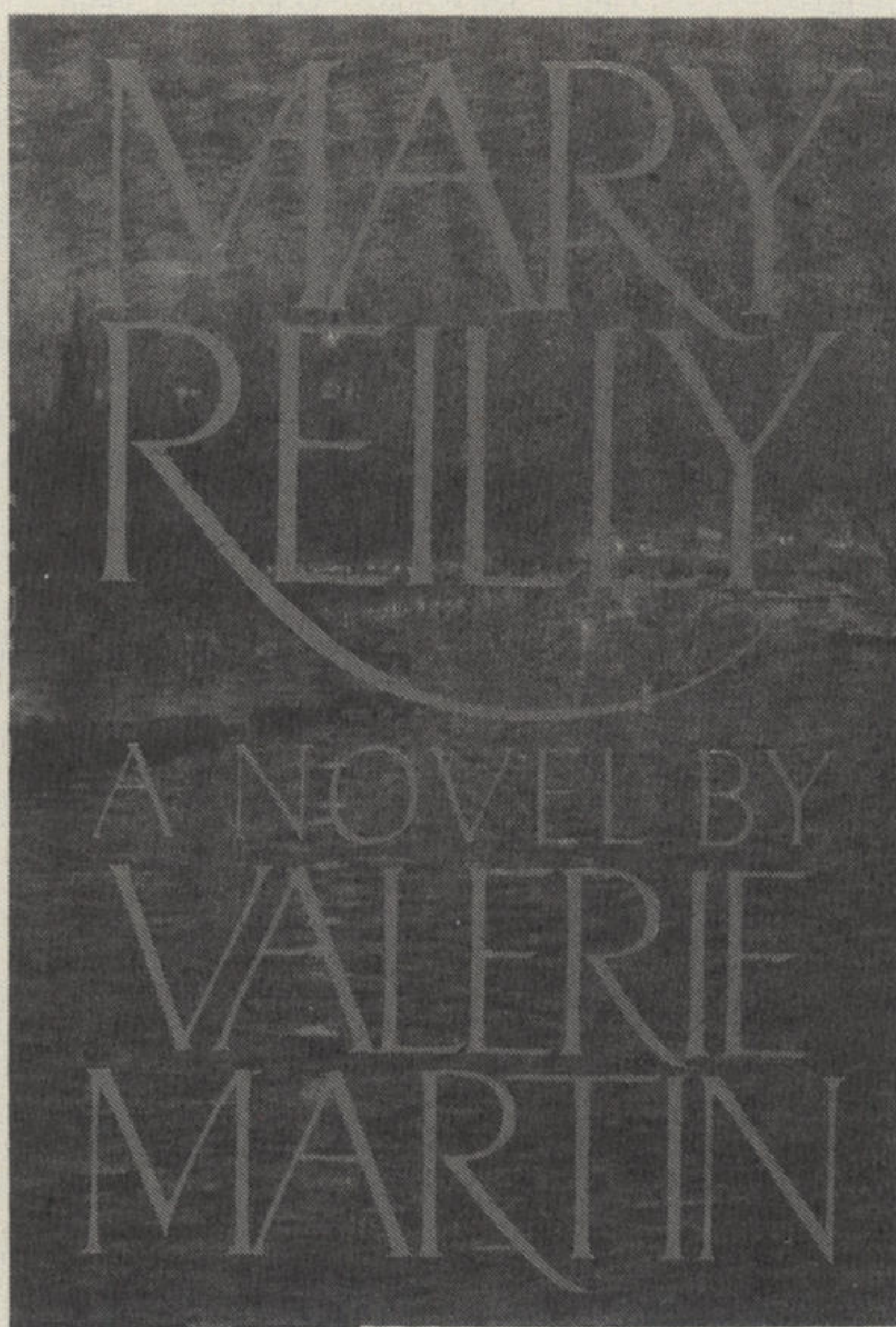
Don't review an anthology series you hope to sell to. Praise will look like flattery. Anything else may reveal, very suddenly, the limits of the editor's professionalism. (Reviewers talk. If someone commits one of these lapses, it'll get around. Suddenly books by so-and-so seem to be collectively ignored. Guess why.)

Also on the no-no list are books by one's collaborators, spouse, or students, not to mention ones you've written, edited, or published. (August Derleth, allegedly, used to review his own books under pseudonyms in Wisconsin newspapers, although, to his credit, not always favorably. Edgar Allan Poe had less integrity. In the *Library of America* volume of Poe's essays, you can find a surprising piece wherein the originally anonymous reviewer assured the public that *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* is a work of truly exceptional merit by a unique voice in American literature. That time has borne out this judgment is

irrelevant. Poe also used to swap reviews with his colleagues, praise for praise.)

So, where does that leave me? Frankly, I've never had any problem finding books to review. All of the above may eliminate twenty-five a year, and since there are *thousands* to choose from, I've never found myself on the horns of the Dickens Dilemma. I can get out of *anything* by saying, "Alas, I haven't had time to read that one yet." And I may be telling the truth. My silence should not be taken as condemnation.

What's a book review supposed



to do? I make the common distinction between reviewing and criticism. The *critic* provides analysis and illumination for people who have already read the text in question. The reviewer provides a consumer report, for people who haven't and may decide on the basis of the review whether that particular book is worth the bother. All else is trappings. The reviewer can (and should) be witty, entertaining, etc., but the core of it is, "This is a good book or a bad book, and here, in my best estimation, is why."

I always try to ask three questions: 1) What is the author trying to do? This is very different from,

"What would I do with this material?" One must review the book the author actually wrote, not the book one wishes the author wrote. 2) Was this successful? 3) Was it worth doing? All of which are, of course, matters of opinion. Book reviewing can never be more than articulated, informed opinion. It isn't gospel.

But what *about* that burning bush?

Well, for my generation (Baby-Boomer), the bush spoke in two Voices: Damon Knight and William Atheling, Jr. (a.k.a. James Blish), authors of (respectively) *In Search of Wonder* and *The Issue at Hand* (and its sequel, *More Issues At Hand*). Before 1970 or so, there was little else *about* science fiction except for the books published by Advent Press, so Knight and Blish, and the symposium *The Science Fiction Novel*, must be counted as seminal influences on the way we think and write about SF.

Any reviewer could do far worse than to model himself on Knight and/or Blish. Both write in (Deconstructionists please note) clear and direct prose, free of jargon. Both judge SF by (at least) the same standards as any other type of literature. They don't make excuses, and they're not afraid to smash a few icons. (Knight's famous demolition of *The World of Null-A* and Blish's similar hatchet-job on A. Merritt spring immediately to mind.) Which is not to say they have no respect. They do, for the reader, and they demand as much from the books they discuss. Both are *technical reviewers*, preoccupied with how stories are constructed and why they work or don't. As a result, *In Search of Wonder* and the Atheling books may have done more to educate a generation of new writers than any number of How To Write volumes. Both have their limitations, particularly Knight, who is blind to all fantasy and made an abysmal attempt to dismiss Lovecraft and Lovecraft's

style on the basis of a long quotation from a story Lovecraft didn't write; but both remain classics, constantly alluded to, worth frequent rereading, and, happily, still in print.

The other cardinal rule of reviewing is stop pontificating and review the damn books. So here we go:

Mary Reilly

By Valerie Martin

Doubleday, 1990

263 pp., \$18.95

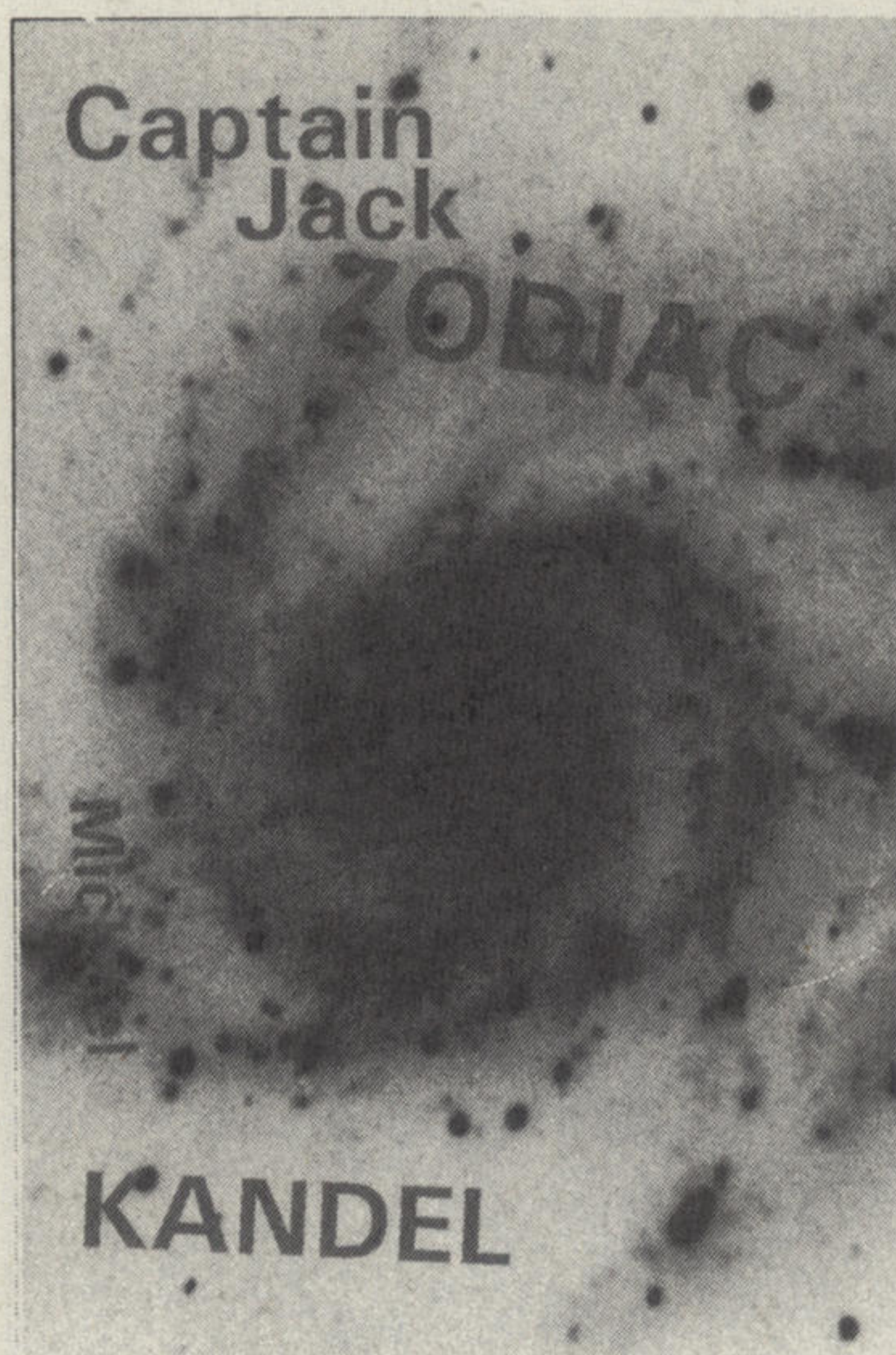
This one is the dark horse from last year's award races, a finalist for the Nebula and World Fantasy Awards, by a non-genre writer nobody had ever heard of. Certainly it lost any chance for the Nebula because it wasn't published as a genre book. Copies were not sent to members or to genre reviewers. I bought mine second-hand at the Chicago worldcon.

Mary Reilly is the story of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* as told by the Good Doctor's maid. It is an example of what I would dub the Referential Story, which requires that you be aware of the original. This is an ancient and respectable form. Most ancient Greek drama assumed the audience already knew the basic story. Similarly *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* presumed familiarity with *Hamlet*. Brian Aldiss's *Frankenstein Unbound* presumed you knew Mary Shelley's story, a somewhat larger risk than Ms. Martin took, since the general culture knows both *Frankenstein* and *Dr. Jekyll* from the movies, and the *Frankenstein* adaptations have borne little resemblance to the original, while the *Dr. Jekyll* ones haven't been that far off.

But, go read Robert Louis Stevenson first, then turn to *Mary Reilly* so you can understand, point by point, what is going on right at the periphery of the narrator's understanding. The original "gives away" less than

you might think, since Stevenson tells his story from a distance. In fact, we witness (rather than hear about) far more of the major events in Martin's version.

And it's a fine novel by any standards. Ms. Martin has all the skills of a good historical novelist, and the most important skill required for (as this happens to be) a first-person novel: she has created an original and convincing voice which is the product of its own world rather than ours. The half-educated Mary is distinctly Victorian, her ideas of class, social order, morality, womanhood, and the like sharply



different from those politically correct in 1991. We see her world as she sees it, which is the whole point in any novel within a non-contemporary setting. Against this background and through this voice, Stevenson seems better than ever. *Mary Reilly* is superbly done, complementing, rather than supplanting (or being diminished by), *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

Captain Jack Zodiac

By Michael Kandel

Broken Mirrors Press
(Box 473, Cambridge,
MA 02238), 1991

224 pp., trade hardcover,
\$13.95;

"special edition" (not seen),
\$50.00

Here's a good-quality hardcover of a Bantam paperback, by the author of two promising novels I've already reviewed in this column: *Strange Invasion* and *In Between Dragons*. Author Kandel is perhaps best known as the good translator of Stanislaw Lem. The clunky translations (*Solaris*) are someone else's. The witty, polished ones (e.g., *The Futurological Congress*) are his.

I confess I am disappointed by his third novel. Like the first two, it is a collection of Neat Bits rather than a coherent story, short scenes, sometimes hard to follow, possibly out of chronological order, all stemming from a comic apocalypse. Off-stage, much of the world has been nuked. But life goes on, sort of. A carefully-manicured lawn turns on its owner, devouring family members. A man dies and gets a dull retail job in the hereafter. Someone takes a subway to Hell in order to have it out with his mother-in-law, who has been haunting the living through a plate of salad. Someone else develops comic-book style superpowers by using the wrong deodorant, but finds himself little appreciated. The title character gives kids drugs whereby they can (physically) trip off to other planets, battle monsters, and carry on like the characters in *In Between Dragons*.

It reads well. It's all rather fun. But I keep waiting for the whole to exceed the sum of the parts.

When Kandel learns that trick, he'll be more than just a promising new novelist. He'll have delivered.

Rating: ☆☆½

He, She, and It

By Marge Piercy

Alfred A. Knopf, 1991
445 pp., \$22.00

Another wander-in, by a writer who's been here before. Among her various prior works, Marge Piercy has one (quite well-received) science fiction novel, *Woman on the Edge of Time*. When someone commented to her that one chapter in that book anticipated cyberpunk, she said, "What's cyberpunk?" She has since found out. The results have been beneficial.

He, She, and It has some of the flaws you'd expect in a science-fiction novel written by an Outsider — it starts clumsily with a lot of lecture; Piercy doesn't really know how to, or else doesn't choose to, finely dice up her exposition and sprinkle it into the text, à la early Heinlein — but we must also remember that it's the Outsiders who frequently knock the genre for ninepins. Think of George Orwell, Aldous Huxley, Bernard Wolfe, or George R. Stewart. So let's not be provincial. Pay attention and we might learn something.

Familiar ideas come thick and fast: A polluted world like the one of *Stand on Zanzibar*. Niven's organleggers. Terminally addictive electrical stimulation of the brain (Niven's "Death by Ecstasy"). Multinational corporations, frequently Japanese, ruling the world. Cyberspace.

But wait, there's more: These huge corporations enforce their own social and religious codes in the cities they rule. Most of the characters are "marranos," Jews who have to pretend to be something else, as they did during the Inquisition. Only in the independent town of Tikva, Massachusetts can they be openly Jewish. But Tikva is under attack by "information pirates" who threaten the town's livelihood and kill the best computer operators through their own mind-links. Therefore an elderly scientist creates Yod, a Golem, who patrols this cyberspace ghetto to protect the people. As Yod struggles toward self-definition, he is told

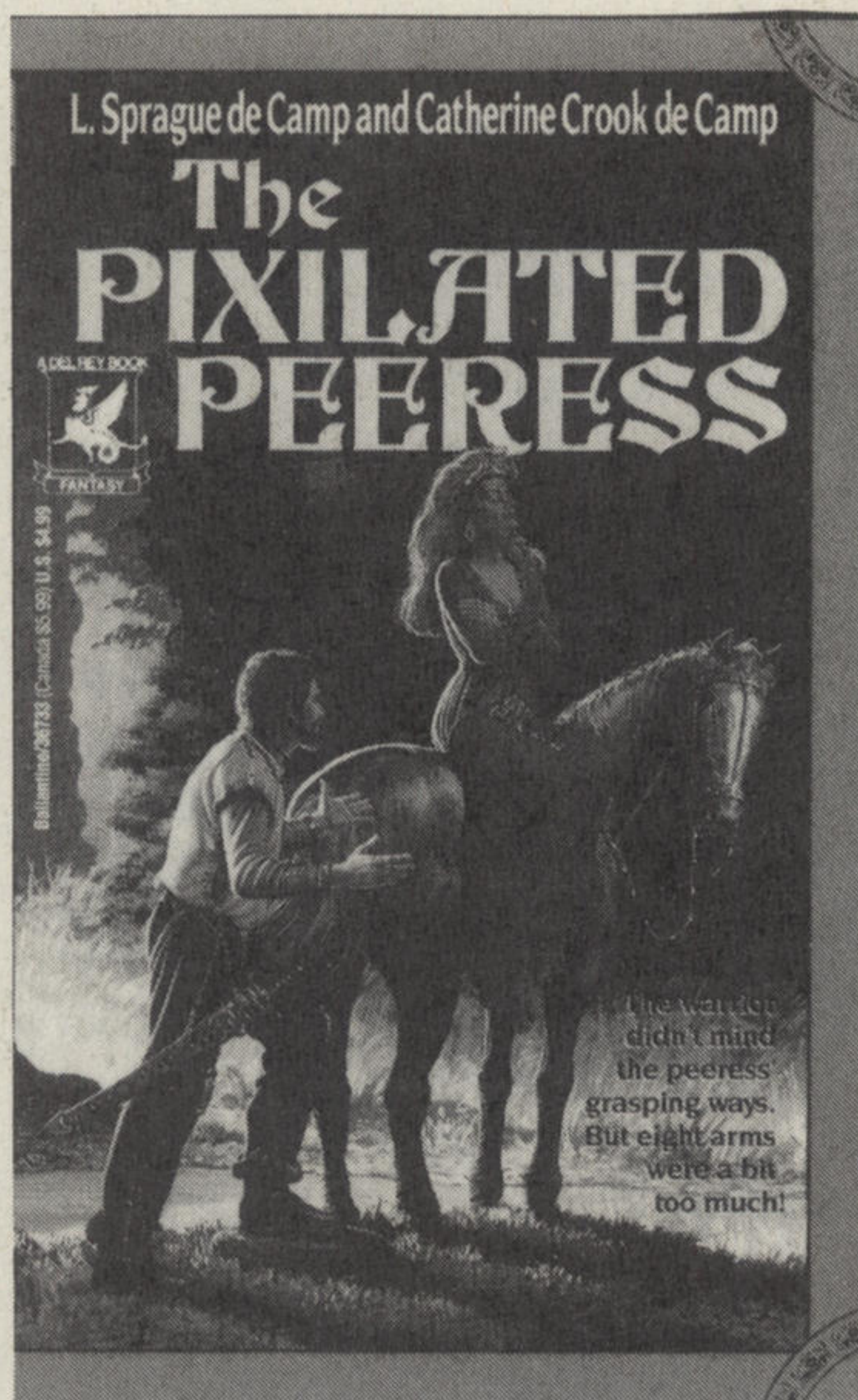
the story of the original, medieval Golem, and the tale-within-a-tale reflects the concerns of both teller and listener and become a meta-fictional commentary on the novel as a whole.

Be patient with the first eighty pages or so. This one is worth reading. It is ultimately moving, and genuinely mythic.

Rating: ☆☆☆½

The Pixilated Peeress

By L. Sprague de Camp and Catherine Crook de Camp
Del Rey Books, 1991
208 pp., \$17.00



What a marvel the de Camps are, still producing books to the same standard after all these years. Were it a little less risqué, minus one scene of explicit troll-sex, this one could have been in *Unknown* fifty years ago.

De Camp just about invented the humorous sword-and-sorcery tale. Once again we have the reluctant adventurer (who would rather be a literary scholar, but got kicked out of college in a brawl) who rescues maidens, defeats evil wizards, captures dragons, and the like, all because the alternatives seem far worse. This time our hero meets a naked

lady in the woods. She's a dispossessed countess and an arrogant one at that, used to giving orders by virtue of her station. But, alas, our hero is a democrat, who doesn't believe all that feudal nonsense ...

Still, a damsel in distress is a damsel in distress, and Sergeant Thorolf must rescue the beautiful Yvette from her political enemies, an incompetent magician who turns her into an octopus at one point, and, most importantly, from the wiles of the evil Doctor Orlandus, a second-rate hack magician whose sinister cult bilks, then brainwashes its victims while building a political power base and intimidating critics into silence. (Satirical analogies to the real world are left to the reader's imagination.)

The action moves briskly through inventive situations toward an ending of (as is often the case in de Camp novels) domestic practicality rather than high romance. One might wish that all the characters didn't speak quite so "forsoothly." This device worked better in *The Unbeheaded King* where the archaisms were mostly spoken by a ghost, who, being several centuries dead, would naturally be a bit behind the modern idiom.

It's all great fun, worth seeking out; and there is more of a satirical subtext than is usual for this sort of fantasy.

Rating: ☆☆☆

Noted:

Letters from Atlantis
By Robert Silverberg
Atheneum, 1990
136 pp., \$14.95

This is part of the Dragonflight series, as packaged by Byron Preiss Visual Productions. I have to admit all my internal alarm bells go off at the idea of a packager offering a series of uniform books in which writers are hired to treat "standard" themes of fan-

tasy: Atlantis, dragons, unicorns, etc., etc. If this isn't a factory system, I don't know what is.

At the same time I can't deny that the writers involved are among the best — and I'll be investigating more of their contributions in future columns — and that the books themselves are extraordinarily handsome. All kudos to jacket-artist Robert Gould and the Byron Preiss art director.

Silverberg's novella itself is, incidentally, science fiction, not fantasy, about time-travellers who lodge themselves in the minds of people in the past, then correspond through secret messages passed through the Atlantean civil service.

It's a smoothly-written tour of wonders, well thought-out and convincing, but passionless, weak on plot and shallow in its characterizations. In story terms, nothing happens save that toward the end, the Atlantean prince discovers that the time-traveller is within him. The time-traveller breaks cover and finds out that the Atlanteans are such fatalists that they were unwilling to build colonies elsewhere against the day their homeland is destroyed. It seems a bit perfunctory, a short story padded out with descriptions.

Rating: ☆☆

The Addams Chronicles

By Stephen Cox
Harper Perennial, 1991
205 pp., \$10.00

The subtitle tells virtually all — *Everything You Ever Wanted To Know About the Addams Family* — and the disclaimer tells the rest — “Not created, licensed, authorized by ... the Charles Addams estate, Paramount Pictures,” etc. So this isn't a tie-in to the recent *Addams Family* movie, not officially anyway, but the timing is, of course, inevitable. It's a well-done book of its kind, with complete episode-data, profiles of

Books

all the cast members and what became of them, and even a listing of the numerous alluded-to Addams relatives, for the benefit of those who never could tell Aunt Drip from Grandma Droop.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

Searoad

By Ursula K. Le Guin
HarperCollins, 1991
193 pp., \$20.00

This is listed largely for completists, not because it is necessarily a minor work, but because it's beyond the scope of this column, as the jacket copy is so careful to spell out: not science fiction, okay for people who don't read science fiction or have given up on science fiction ...

Briefly, literary mainstream stories, from *The New Yorker* and elsewhere, mostly intimate portraits of frequently elderly characters living in a small town in Oregon. Some of the stories seem to me rambling and diffuse, some quite effective, all exquisitely written on a sentence-by-sentence level, almost like poetry at times; but overall my impression is that, while Le Guin must undeniably follow her artistic vision wherever it leads her, as a

mainstream writer she is decidedly less unusual, and *Searoad* is far removed from what made her famous in the first place.

One episode, “Crosswords,” is very marginally a ghost story.

Rating: ☆☆☆

At Tea in the Mortuary

by Stanley McNail
Embassy Hall Editions
(1630 University Ave.,
Suite 42, Berkeley CA 94703),
1991
54 pp., \$6.00

Stanley McNail's *Something Breathing* (1965) had the distinction of being one of the few Arkham House poetry collections which was actually *good* rather than merely associational. His light, gruesome verse can be read with real pleasure, and its quality hasn't diminished over the years. McNail's not a Great Poet by any means, but one can appreciate someone capable of writing: “While she spoke to us, one eye came free/ And slid from its socket right into her tea.”

Two short stories included are less interesting than the verse. Illustrations by Christopher Chavez are amateurish.

Rating: ☆☆☆

□

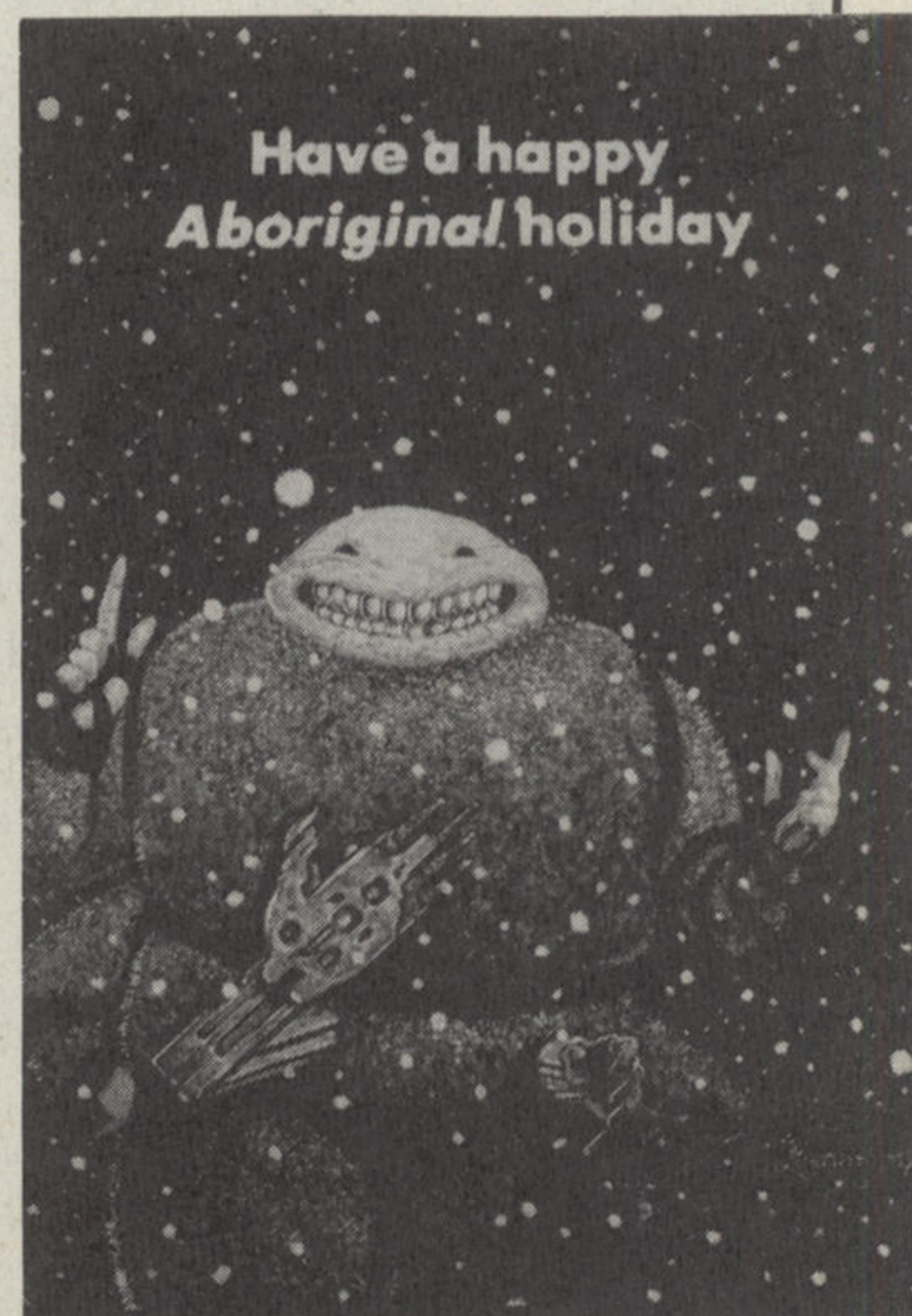
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Masters of the Field



I write this several days after the death of Isaac Asimov. Though it was hardly unexpected — especially if you'd been reading his magazine editorials for the past several months — it saddened me deeply. Asimov's work was my introduction to written

transparent style is harder to achieve than most would think), better at characterization, but no one was better at pulling you along and making you think. And unlike the work of some of the other gray eminences of the SF field, much of Asimov's later work — e.g. *The Robots of Dawn* and *Prelude to Foundation* — was among his best. Asimov's passing leaves a hole that will be impossible to fill, both in the field and in my heart.

Doomsday Book

By Connie Willis

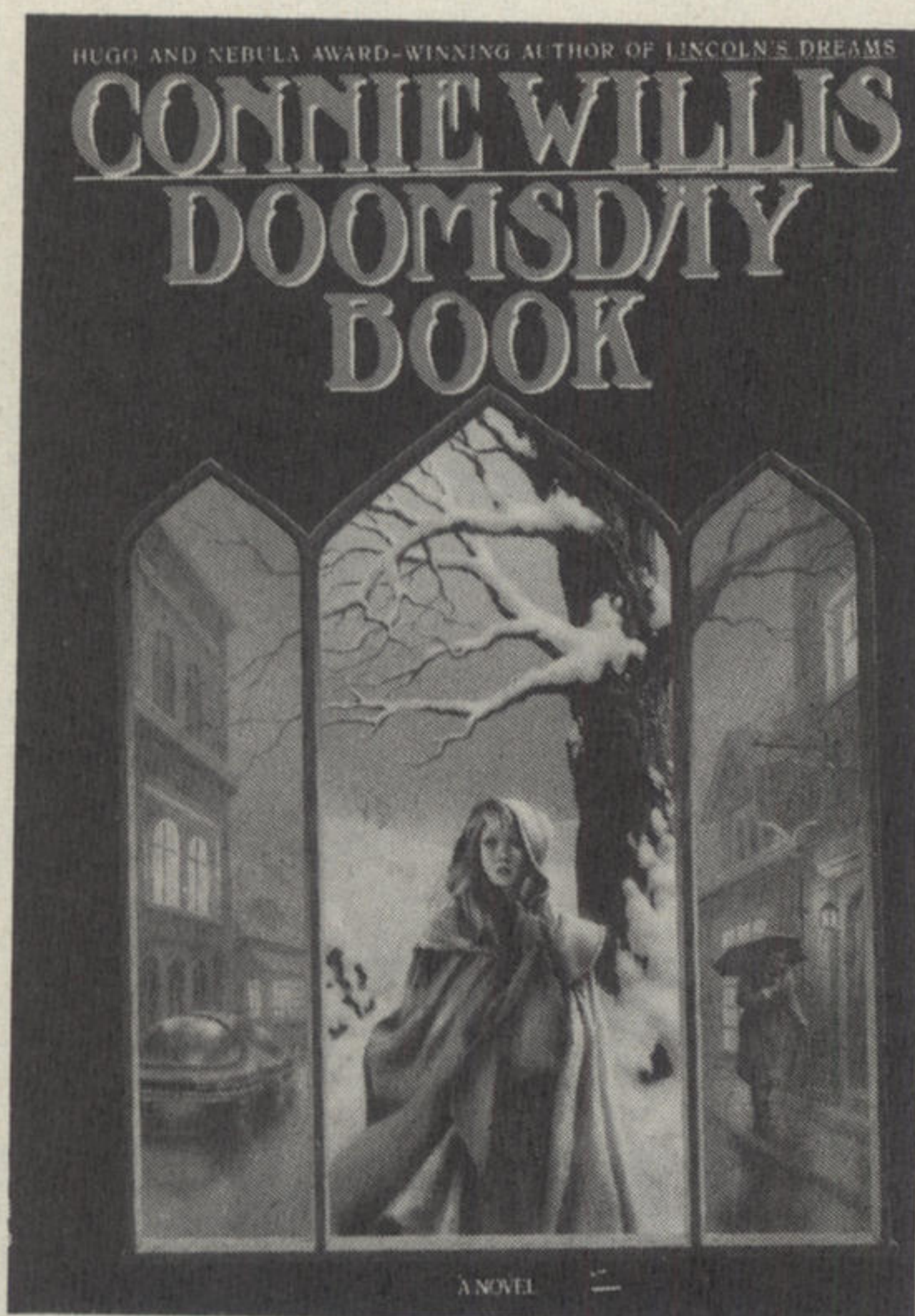
Bantam/Spectra, 1992

448 pp., \$22.00 hc, \$10.00 pb

Connie Willis is one of the most extraordinary writers in the SF field. Her range extends from the screwball comedy of "Blued Moon" and "At the Rialto" to the brutal horror of "All My Darling Daughters" and the more subtle horror of "A Letter From the Clearys"; from the quasi-ghost story of her first novel, *Lincoln's Dreams*, to the straightforward time-travel SF of her second, *Doomsday Book*. Willis is an incredibly careful writer; if she shows you a gun hanging on the wall, not only will it be fired before the story's over, but the nails holding it up will come into play as well. As you might guess, *Doomsday Book* is a beautifully woven tapestry, with not a thread out of place.

The novel is set in the same

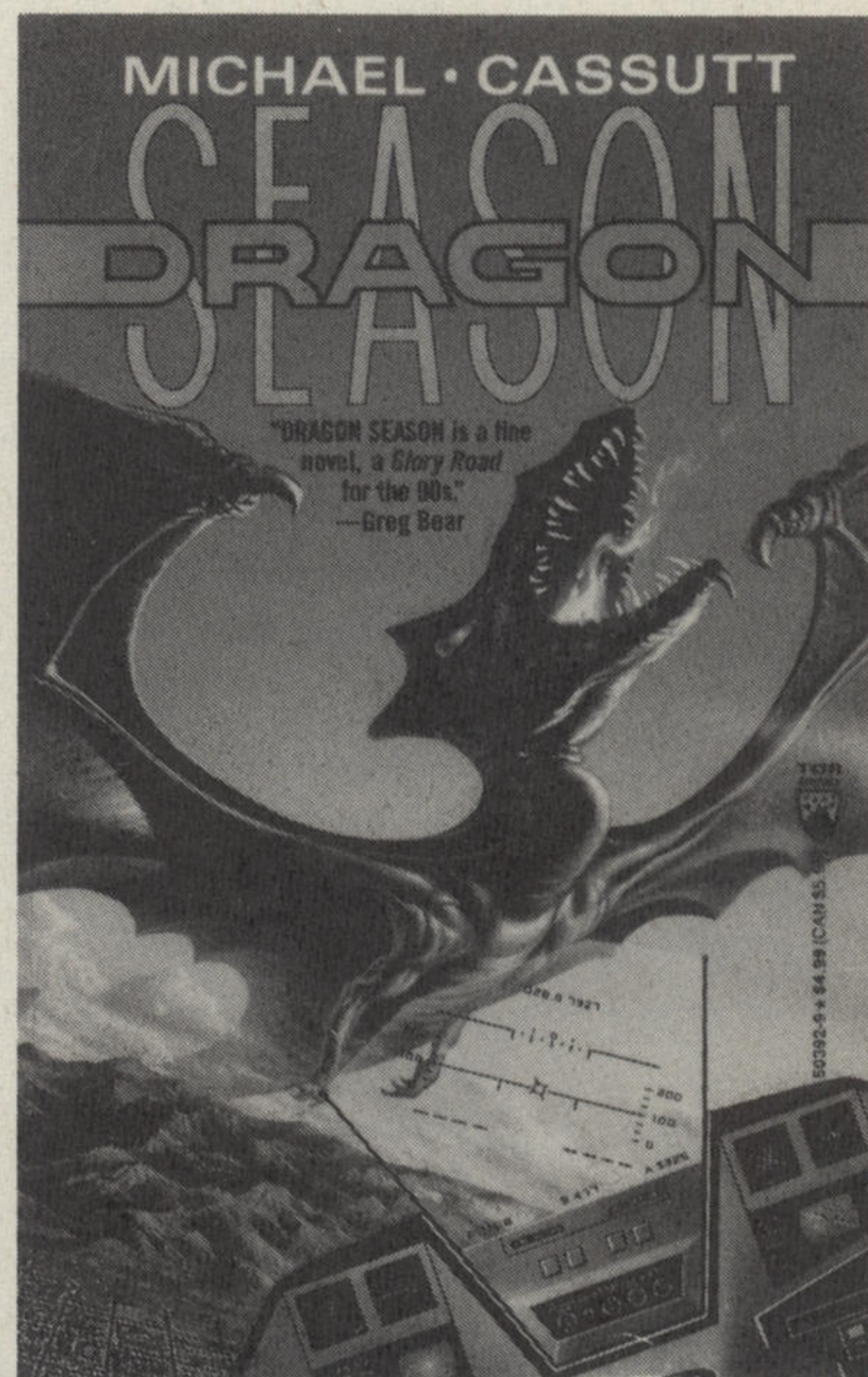
world as her story "Fire Watch," but it's by no means necessary to have read that piece. It is the year 2054, and the Oxford University History Department uses time travel to send researchers back into the past. Student Kivrin Engle departs for the year 1320,



science fiction, and it has remained a source of enjoyment to me over the years. Others were better writers technically, better stylists (though Asimov's utterly

Rating System

☆☆☆☆☆	Outstanding
☆☆☆☆	Very Good
☆☆☆	Good
☆☆	Fair
☆	Poor



over the strenuous objections of her mentor, Mr. Dunworthy, who considers the Middle Ages too dangerous for visitors.

For the bulk of the novel we move between Kivrin's medieval adventures and the excitement of the "present," where Dunworthy must cope with academic infighting and an epidemic, both of which could pose dangers to Kivrin. The paral-

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els are not intrusive or blatant, but the stories work together to excellent effect. The rules and limitations of the time-travel system are clear and logical, and they support the structure of the novel.

The texture of both worlds is brilliantly created: we are *there*, in both the rain-soaked streets of Oxford and the freezing halls of a medieval English castle. The characters, including the subsidiary ones, are real as can be — I was particularly enchanted by Rosemund, a little girl Kivrin meets. I became so involved in the stories that at the end I was left stunned.

Are there any flaws? A few. Kivrin's tutor, Professor Latimer, is a little too much of an idiot to be believable. In order to hide an important piece of information from Dunworthy, one character is kept in delirium for most of the book — which might not be so bad if we didn't, on several occasions, rush to the hospital because he has something important to say, only to find him delirious or unconscious once again. Once would have been passable, but more than once smacks of manipulation more than suspense. You're likely to figure out a crucial plot point long before Kivrin does, even if you haven't read reviews that give it away.

These are minor problems in what is overall a magnificent piece of writing. *Doomsday Book* is entertaining, thought-provoking, and moving.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆☆

Lafferty In Orbit

By R.A. Lafferty
Broken Mirrors Press, 1991
220 pp., \$13.95

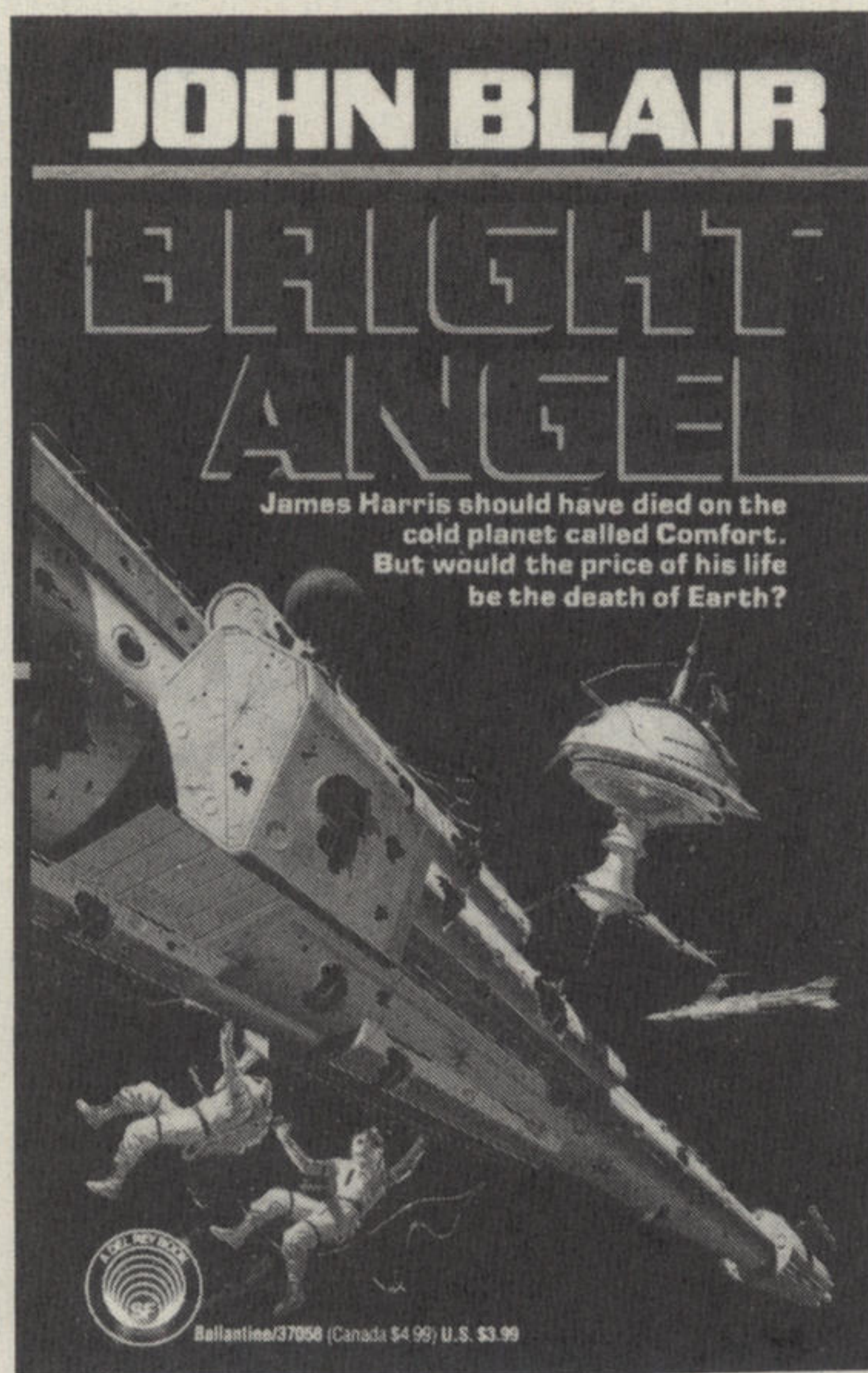
Tales of Chicago

By R.A. Lafferty
United Mythologies Press, 1992
109 pp., \$19.95

Not too many writers truly deserve the term "unique," but R.A. Lafferty is one of them. Un-
From the Bookshelf

fortunately, his particular brand of uniqueness is considered sufficiently uncommercial that for years his work has only been published in the U.S. by small presses. Lafferty's work is, clearly, not to everyone's taste, but it's worth making the effort to seek it out. He has been an important influence on many more commercially successful writers, and can be a sheer delight to read.

Lafferty in Orbit is a collection of 18 stories that originally ap-



peared in Damon Knight's *Orbit* series of original anthologies. They include the dystopian SF of "The Hand with One Hundred Fingers," the fable "Bright Coins in Never-Ending Stream," the alternate history of "Interurban Queen," and the exuberant surrealism of "Flaming Ducks and Giant Bread." But to classify Lafferty's stories that way might give you the false impression that they're like any other stories you've ever read. No matter what subgenre they might fall into — and many of them would have to define their own — they all have what Damon Knight's introduction calls Lafferty's "magnificently loony" quality.

The flaw of this collection is that, read all at once, it can become

tiresome. It is best read in bits, whenever you need a dose of sublime weirdness.

Tales of Chicago is the first volume of a trilogy called *More Than Melchisedech*, the life story of Melchisedech Duffey, magus. It is more straightforward than many of the *Orbit* stories, but still magnificently loony. Lafferty can do things no other author can get away with; at one point he spends over a page just listing the names of people Duffey knows, and it somehow is not boring.

This volume traces the first 40 or 50 years of Duffey's life, and does not end so much as stop, leaving us waiting for the next installment. It's not completely clear yet the end Lafferty is aiming at, but the remaining two books should be fascinating.

I'd like to make a couple of brief comments about the appearance of *Tales from Chicago*. Though from a very small press, it is well-bound and attractive, and the desktop-published text quite readable. However, someone at United Mythologies should get hold of a book called *The Mac Is Not a Typewriter*; a few simple changes would greatly improve the book's appearance. Also, the volume is loaded with typos, most of which are the sort that a computer's spelling-checker would not catch. Human proofreading is a must. (In case you're wondering, I didn't discuss the appearance of *Lafferty In Orbit* because I haven't seen a finished copy of that book.)

Ratings:

Lafferty In Orbit: ☆☆☆☆

Tales of Chicago: ☆☆☆ 1/2

Raft

By Stephen Baxter
Roc, 1992
303 pp., \$4.99

The classic hard SF story takes off from a simple what-if question: What if a machine could tell you when you'd die? What if the stars

only came out once every 10,000 years? Clearly we haven't run out of fruitful questions, for Stephen Baxter has found an exciting one: What if people entered a universe where the force of gravity is a billion times as strong as in ours? He's thought through the answer, made it (mostly) believable, and produced a tale of human weakness and stupidity conquered by human determination and heroism.

The most immediately interesting aspect of *Raft* is this high-gravity universe, and Baxter has set it up well, answering nearly any question you can imagine — though he's smart to avoid the question of how the original ship's crew survived when thrust into the new universe. He skillfully integrates the necessary information into the story, requiring very few lectures and keeping those short enough not to become annoying. The mathematics of movement in a place where, for example, a person has a respectable gravitational field, are quite complicated, but Baxter makes us take it almost as much in course as do his characters, descendants of the original crew eking out a circumscribed and often miserable life.

Baxter also tells a good story, with a plot combining coming of age with saving the world. His sense of invention is remarkable and generally proceeds logically from his premises, though I found the Boneyes — outcasts living a macabre existence on human remains — unconvincing. Baxter is very credible when showing how the original meritocracy of the ship has become a stratified, unstable society. The central problem of the novel is that the world that supports the characters is coming to an inevitable end; its solution is goshwow super-science, but not unbelievable once you grant the premise of the book.

The characters are likable and reasonably well-rounded, though Baxter occasionally leans on

stereotypes and his villains are too thoroughly villainous. They're not memorable; a few weeks after reading the book, I was hard-pressed to recall any of them but the protagonist. Towards the end of the novel, the characterization becomes minimal because there's so much plot going on that there's no room for it; that's only slightly disturbing, though, because you get swept up in the adventure.

Raft is an exciting, well-constructed piece of old-fashioned hard SF. You may forget some of the characters, but you won't soon forget Baxter's universe.



Rating: ☆☆☆ 1/2

The Face in the Frost

By John Bellairs

Collier Nucleus, 1991

174 pp., \$4.95

Collier is promoting *The Face in the Frost* as a lost classic of fantasy, and I think they're right. John Bellairs wrote no other adult novels, turning to juvenile fantasies, and this 1969 book has so far rested in undeserved obscurity. It is a delightful, witty, magical novel.

The main characters are two wizards: Prospero (no relation) and Roger Bacon (apparently the

one you're thinking of). Together they must fight an evil force that threatens to destroy Prospero's world. Nothing particularly unusual there. The delights of *The Face in the Frost* rest in the writing, the characters, and the fantasy world.

Bellairs's invention never lets up; around every corner is a revelation. He moves readers rapidly from laughter to terror to tears, always keeping them firmly in the world of the novel. The plot bogs down slightly here and there, but Bellairs writes well enough to keep us hanging on regardless.

The Face in the Frost deserves a place in the ranks of classic fantasy novels. I'm sorry Bellairs wrote no more such novels, but I'm glad that at least Collier has rescued this one.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

Dragon Season

By Michael Cassutt

Tor, 1991

245 pp., \$4.99

The premise of *Dragon Season* is very old: the woman from another world (i.e. Faerie) with whom a man from our world falls in love, ignorant of her origin. But in his first novel, Michael Cassutt does a fine job with it, making it exciting and bringing in a new twist by figuring out how the existence of parallel worlds could be useful to unscrupulous inhabitants of each.

The book starts punchily, with an abandoned baby and a missing lover, and sets off at a good clip. It rarely lets up, and indeed the plot becomes hard to follow near the end since everything is happening so fast. It is well written, including some unusual details. While Cassutt provides a good sense of place in our world (the Tucson area), that is less true in the other world — which is a shame since, naturally, it is less familiar to us. I found visualizing the other world difficult.

The main character, Rick Walsh, is believable and handles the un-

expected and unprecedented situation well — perhaps too well to be completely realistic, but this is, after all, a novel with a hero. The other characters are okay, though depicted with less depth.

If you're looking for an adventure novel with intelligence and wit, look no further. *Dragon Season* is promising and fun.

Rating: ☆☆☆ 1/2

Take Back Plenty

By Colin Greenland

Avon, 1992

484 pp., \$4.99

Colin Greenland is one of the hot new British SF writers. Surprisingly for those who think of British SF as gloomy and New Wave-ish, *Take Back Plenty* is an old-fashioned space opera featuring a Mars with canals and a jungle-covered Venus — even the surprise ending comes straight out of the pulps. It's substantially better written than its pulp predecessors, though, and lots of fun.

Greenland's use of an omniscient narrator (whose identity is revealed near the end, though you'll have guessed it already) is a mistake, I think; by reporting everything in a light historical tone, the narration distances us from the story, making it harder to get involved with the protagonist, Tabitha Jute. And she is the only character likely to lead to involvement; the others tend to be one-dimensional, though I liked the strange, Puckish being Xtasca. Tabitha is a good, strong heroine, without much resemblance to the Spandex babe on the cover. You quickly grow to like her, and, if not for the distancing narration, would identify with her.

Take Back Plenty is fast-moving and funny; there's always something new happening. In fact, the pace occasionally leaves you breathless as you try to figure out what's happening. I'm afraid it's sheer mind candy, though. (It's

From the Bookshelf

possible that the book is some sort of ironic comment on the space-opera subgenre, but if so, the point escaped me.)

If you're seeking Art, originality, and depth, look elsewhere. But if you can accept *Take Back Plenty* on its own terms, as an intelligently-written space opera with a bit of sex, lots of action, and a likable heroine, you'll enjoy it.

Rating: ☆☆☆

Bright Angel

By John Blair

Del Rey, 1991

290 pp., \$3.99

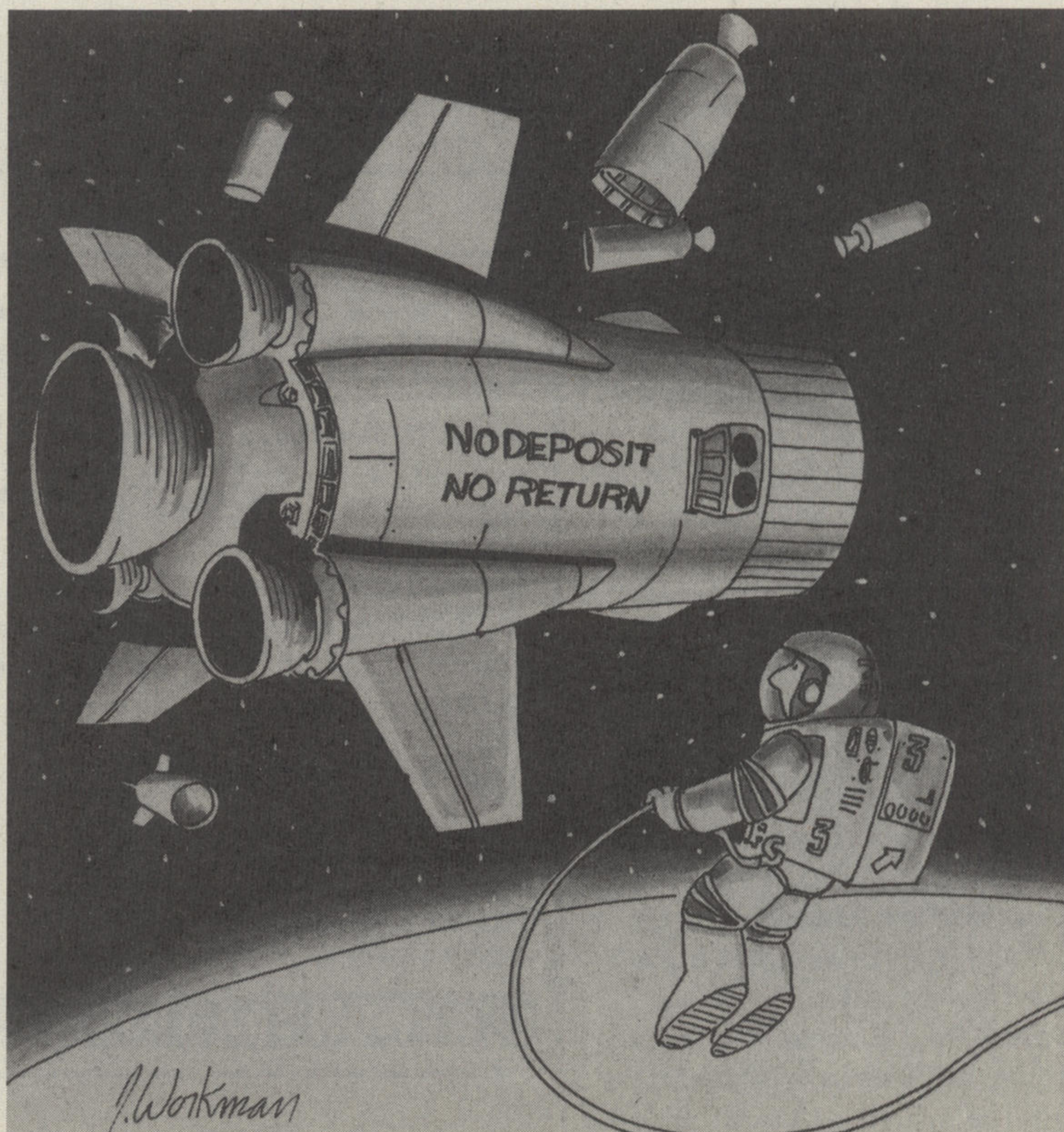
Bright Angel is an unusual near-future novel. Though it is set on an Earth sliding rapidly into a new ice age, it is not an environmental cautionary tale, but rather a story of guilt, love, and truly alien thinking.

The book opens with a seeming impossibility. A colonial expedition has been sent to a planet

called Comfort, reported by probes to be a paradise world, but which turns out to be a frozen hell. James Harris, one of the dying colonists, somehow is instantaneously transported back to Earth. Shortly afterward, our world begins to freeze as well, and Harris is convinced that he is responsible — but unable to say how. Meanwhile, the climate change, dangerous enough in itself, is threatening to lead to a world war.

Blair is good at depicting the world of 2070, though this future has experienced less social change than might be expected. In this post-Gorbachev world, the Soviet Union's old role is filled by China, which serves well, though I would have liked to see more complications arising from differences between Western and Chinese cultures. The characters are likable but, except for Chinese scientist Song Lan, unmemorable.

Bright Angel has an intriguing



plot that holds the reader's interest, and it's competently written with occasional flashes of originality. The solution to the problem is unexpected, and the ending is both satisfying and moving. The novel is worth reading, and Blair is worth watching.

Rating: ☆☆☆

Crygander

By Thomas T. Thomas

Baen, 1992

316 pp., \$4.99

Thomas T. Thomas's *Crygander* is a suspenseful near-future SF thriller. The title character is a mysterious surgically-created hermaphrodite, everything about whom — including his or her original sex — is an enigma.

Cry runs a resort called Babylon, essentially a luxurious brothel. A number of characters converge on Babylon in classic thriller fashion for different, but — it turns out — intertwined purposes. Things at Babylon, as you might expect, are Not What They Seem. The plot involves terrorism, organ transplants, filial love, romantic love, and revenge, but surprisingly little sex, considering the story's setting. There were developments I should have seen coming, since the clues were all there, but I didn't, which is exactly how a good suspense novel should work.

The story works for the most part, though near the end it acquires the feel of television, with one just-in-time rescue after another. The motive eventually revealed for Crygander's existence is unconvincing, though that for Babylon's existence makes sense. The existence of Crygander as a hermaphrodite really isn't essential to the story; it's just an exciting surface feature.

The book moves along at a good thriller pace, and the writing is generally fine. However, there is a long, boring lecture right at the beginning, which isn't even necessary. Authors take note: having

one character complain that a lecture being given by another character is boring does not redeem the lecture.

Thomas's biggest mistake, however, is the epilogue. It is clumsy, not credible, and completely superfluous, and makes the reader leave the book unsatisfied and annoyed. If Thomas felt he *had* to let us know what happened to the characters after the book was over, I'd have preferred his just telling us straight out, as they do with a crawl up the screen at the end of some movies. Where was Thomas's editor?

It's unfortunate that the book's flaws are at the beginning and the end, because they tend to taint the enjoyable and interesting middle. Read the book. Skip the epilogue.

Rating: ☆☆☆

Futurespeak: A Fan's Guide to the Language of Science Fiction

By Roberta Rogow

Paragon House, 1991

408 pp., \$24.95

Futurespeak commits the worst sin a reference book can: it's inac-

curate, often hilariously so. Open it to almost any page, and you will find at least one error. Some of the mistakes are so fundamental that you have to wonder whether Roberta Rogow researched this book, or just wrote it off the top of her head. (My favorite, which will be meaningful to the computer types among you, is Rogow's definition of Unix as a computer system "developed and marketed by IBM.")

It's not just a question of factual errors, though, but of bewildering omissions and distortions. How can you define "future history" without reference to Heinlein? Rogow's brief analysis of the "New Wave" is simply bizarre. Also, her bias toward media fandom reveals itself in inaccuracies and slanted editorial comments in the definitions of items such as "book fans" and "fanzines."

I fear that this book will become a standard reference outside the SF community. Don't buy it. Discourage libraries from buying it. Maybe it will go away.

Rating: ☆



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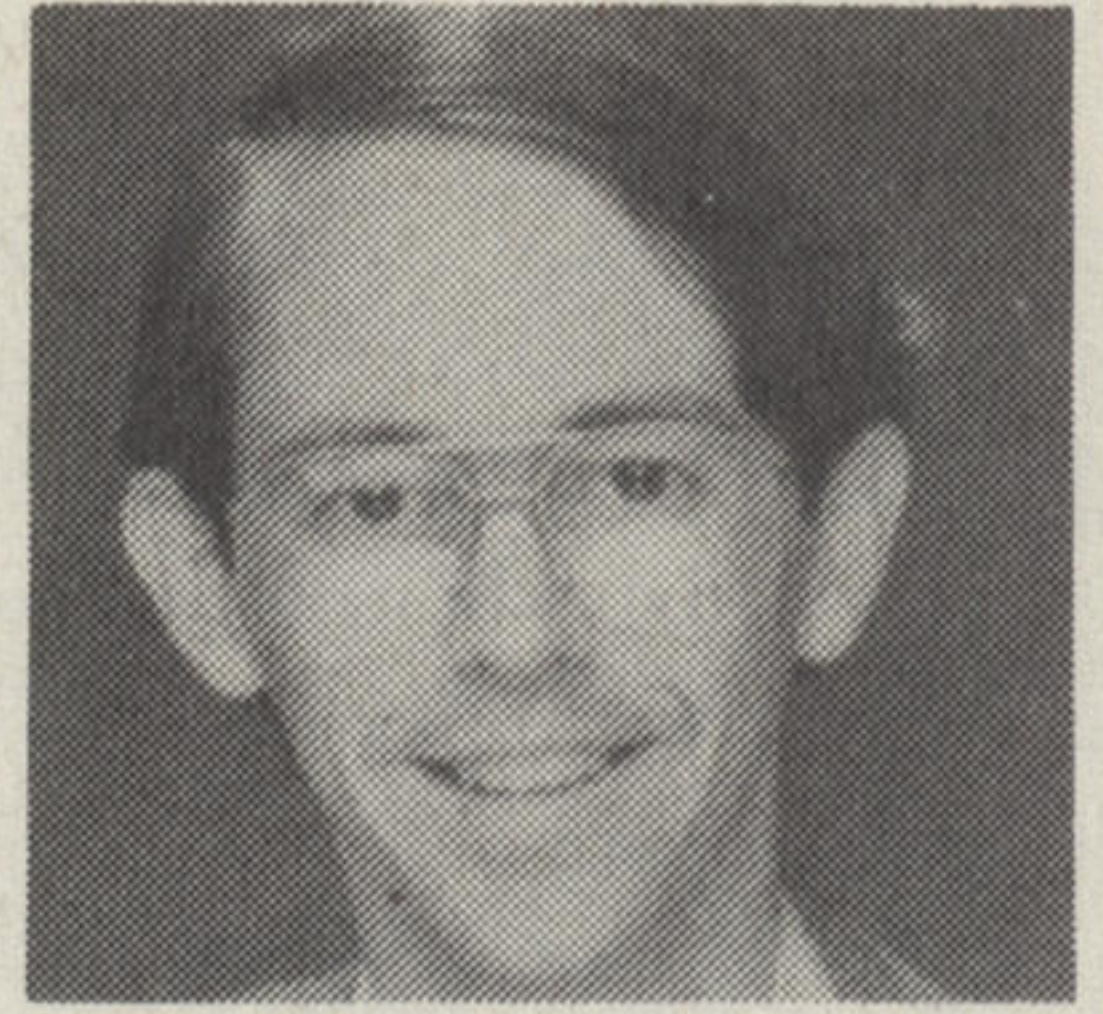
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Conference



Welcome back. Do you remember where we left off? Well, I'll remind you. Last column I told you how technical types are encouraged (arms often twisted to the point of shoulders popping from sockets) to submit abstracts of the work that they are doing to upcoming conferences where they can report on that work. I outlined that procedure — the panic, the pain, the frustration and political intrigue, and by column end our intrepid engineer (yes, it was me) was rewarded with a letter from MIT announcing that the abstract had been accepted and in three months' time I should be in Boston to present my results (View Graphs please), and to turn in a paper detailing the work (footnotes, references, figures — the whole nine yards). If you remember, I swore I would start to work early on the paper and the View Graphs, that there wouldn't be any of the last-minute panic that gripped me in the generation of the abstract.

What do you think?

Did I get it done early?

Be serious.

Of course not.

I had the engine running, was praying all the lights would be green, and I knew there'd be no way I'd be parking in the airport's *outlying* lot (and I didn't). I needed every minute I could get. The flight from LA International left at noon, and I was dog-trotting through the Research Labs' front lobby, with still-warm View Graphs stuffed in my briefcase, at 10:27. Under optimal conditions it

takes an hour and a half to get to the airport.

That gave me plenty of time.

Right.

I hit the terminal at 12:12. But that was no problem. The plane was late. They're always late. So I made the plane, stuffed my luggage in the overhead (never, never check it in — my View Graphs and shirts once took an unscheduled tour of Florida while I sweated in New Orleans), dropped into the seat, and started to breathe easy. I should have opened my briefcase and done some work. I could have read the latest *Journal of Applied Physics*. I could have worked on that proposal for the Navy. I could have outlined the next set of lattice matching experiments.

But I didn't.

The pressure was now off. I was going to a *conference*. The schedule goes like this. The conference is usually a three-day affair, in this case Wednesday through Friday, starting at eight in the morning and sometimes running late into the night. Wednesday night is the banquet, and Thursday night is the rump session (details to follow). There are usually four sessions a day, two before lunch and two after, each of which lasts about two hours. Each session is opened with an invited speaker (this is often someone who has been around for a long time, has a reputation, did some outstanding work when I was learning to tie my shoes, and is a close personal friend of the conference chairman). This invited speaker will talk for thirty

minutes and take questions from the audience for another ten. The rest of the speakers get ten minutes to explain their gee-whiz results followed by five minutes of comments and questions in which their colleagues will dispute the gee-whizness of those results. There is one more mode of presenting results which I have not mentioned — the Poster. When you are told that your abstract was found worthy and that you can present your results, you have not yet *quite* made it to the promised land. There are two types of presentations — Oral and Poster. When you inform your boss of the acceptance of your abstract, the first question out of his or her mouth is: Oral or Poster? If you reply Poster, your boss's brow usually furrows and that nasty tic in his or her left cheek starts to act up. A Poster paper means that you along with thirty or forty of your colleagues will stand in a large room for several hours with copies of your View Graphs taped to dog-eared chunks of cardboard, and you will then explain what you've done to anyone who wanders by.

There is supposed to be no shame in this. The conference officials will tell you that Poster papers are just as relevant, just as cutting-edge, just as gee-whiz as the Oral presentations.

Right.

For those of you who might believe that, I've also got some lovely swamp land for sale that

would make the perfect weekend hideaway. Those presenting Poster papers will stand there, smiling, looking like runners up in the Miss America contest — trying to convince both themselves and you that they have been honored by simply having participated in this wondrous event. No one really believes that — especially them.

During the three days of the conference there will be the opportunity to hear some fifty talks and look over some fifty Posters. I might end up paying attention to twenty of them. Ten might be interesting. Five might be of some relevance. Two might be surprising. One might be *truly* important.

All these things went through my mind as I flew eastward, but soon I tired of it, knowing that the daydreams could never come close to the reality of several hundred wild and crazy Ph.D.s stuffed into a hotel in Boston, all on expense accounts, and many of whom might not have seen the light of day for months. So I soon pulled out an SF book from my briefcase and started to read.

Day 0.

The night before is often spent having dinner with a few old schoolmates, or just lying low in your room, trying to beat back jet lag, checking out those View Graphs, and wondering who you might be stumbling across in the hotel lobby's rest room in the next few days. I usually christen the beginning of any conference with room service — a club sandwich, french fries, and a Coke. But before you can go to bed, you must *register*. This requires going down to the hotel lobby and searching for the largest male-dominated, eyeglass-wearing, back-slapping, obnoxiously loud, unfashionably dressed group you can find. In the center of them will be the Registration table. You approach this group slowly, sizing them up, sniffing the wind for the scent of

both friends and enemies. You shake a few hands, note who lost a bit more hair or put on a few more pounds, and eavesdrop on discussions of funding problems, where the best restaurants are in town (the stranger the better — discovering an Eskimo-Turkish café featuring whale blubber falafels would make you the hit of the conference), who was promoted, and who was fired. Eventually you get to the Registration table. This is the first test. Those at the table are usually the conference Treasurer, possibly the Vice-Chairman, and several of the Session Chairmen. The test is this — do any of these people know you by sight? The people at the table are those in power, those who have climbed the politico-techno ladder of success.

They are the *Insiders*.

If you walk up to them, and the Treasurer (this person is often destined to be next year's Chairman) recognizes you and pulls out your badge and list of attendees without you having to inform him who you actually are, then you've successfully passed this first test. You've been *recognized*. Sometimes they know me, sometimes they don't. This time I was in luck (this was actually not luck at all, just some astute politics on my part — one of the almost ten names on my paper is that of the Treasurer, a professor whom I enlisted to do a bit of work with me). We chat a few minutes, rather loudly, and a few people look over. One is a contract monitor from the Army (they sponsor research, *i.e.*, they can give you *money*). I smile. I've scored a direct hit. For a contract monitor to have seen me with the Insiders is as good as or possibly even better than submitting an insightful, detailed, scientifically brilliant proposal to him. After that little coup I quickly duck out and head back to the room. Any other encounters would simply be anticlimactic.

Day 1

The first session starts at 8:00, which means that I'll go down to the Ballroom (it's always in the Ballroom), where a nearly infinite number of seats, tables, and pitchers full of water are assembled. In the front of the Ballroom is the speaker's podium, and a View Graph projector and screen, while in the back of the Ballroom is the food. There's always food. I get some orange juice, a doughnut, a bear claw, and a slice of melon. The food at the back of the room is like a watering hole on the African Savannah — all the animals are circling, scenting the air, kicking at the dirt, trying not to be eaten, but more than happy to eat somebody else. This area of the Ballroom is where the prime *hanking* takes place. *Hanking* is a term used to denote backslapping when it is coupled with the most inane, superficial conversation imaginable, this name being inspired by a professor who is a master of this technique and who shall remain nameless (first name is Hank, of course) so that the innocent (that's me) will not be incinerated at the next conference. After doing as much hanking as my stomach will tolerate, I find a seat. The location is very important. You do not sit in the first three rows — this is where graduate students and terminal suck-ups sit, looking just like puppies with wagging tails, hoping that some mighty Insider might actually make eye contact with them. Just as bad as the front seats are the back seats — those are reserved for those with hangovers, the recently demoted, and the totally bewildered. I always go for the middle, right on the aisle (aisle seats permit last-minute hanking as the Insiders go to their seats). When the conference starts, the Chairman will say a few words to welcome you, and then the first invited talk begins. You may be thinking that this is one of the principal reasons I've come to this conference, to hear

these talks.

No.

Everything that is being said at the podium is going to be contained in the papers that the presenters submitted when they registered (just like the one I spent the previous weekend writing). I could have stayed home and read the conference proceedings if that was all I wanted. The real action, the reason your boss shelled out the money for you to be there, is to hang out at the food table in the back of the Ballroom, and even more important, to cruise the hotel lobby. To hang out in the lobby means you won't hear the presentations as they're being given. This demonstrates to all those around you just how superior and enlightened you are. *You* already know *everything* that's worth knowing.

But still you sit and listen.

It is polite and proper conference etiquette.

But after a few short minutes you can get up and head for the back of the Ballroom and start hanking. To stay seated too long demonstrates that no one knows you, that no one is willing to talk to you. You can't let that happen. Even if you don't know a single soul, it's better to head to the back of the Ballroom and start talking to the bear claws and melon wedges. This is how your day will be spent, getting up and down, listening briefly to a talk, eating food that is raising your cholesterol level by several points every hour, and hanking it up until the palm of your slapping hand is raw.

Hanking supreme takes place that night at the Banquet. There is a speaker as at any other Banquet, usually some godfather of

the technical arena that this conference is focused on, someone to tell you what it was like in the beginning, how hard and how lonely it was. He will tell you what it was like to walk ten miles barefoot through the snow and slush to get to the lab. This conference was no exception. There was too much drinking going on. Voices got loud. Old rivalries flared into open hostilities (I witnessed a slice of chocolate cake "accidentally" being dropped on someone's bald head). The old guard told the tales of ancient times, and the new Insiders roared, proudly telling how many millions of dollars their operations can burn without generating a single result. Eventually the evening ended. I do not have a very clear recollection of it, and for that I am grateful.

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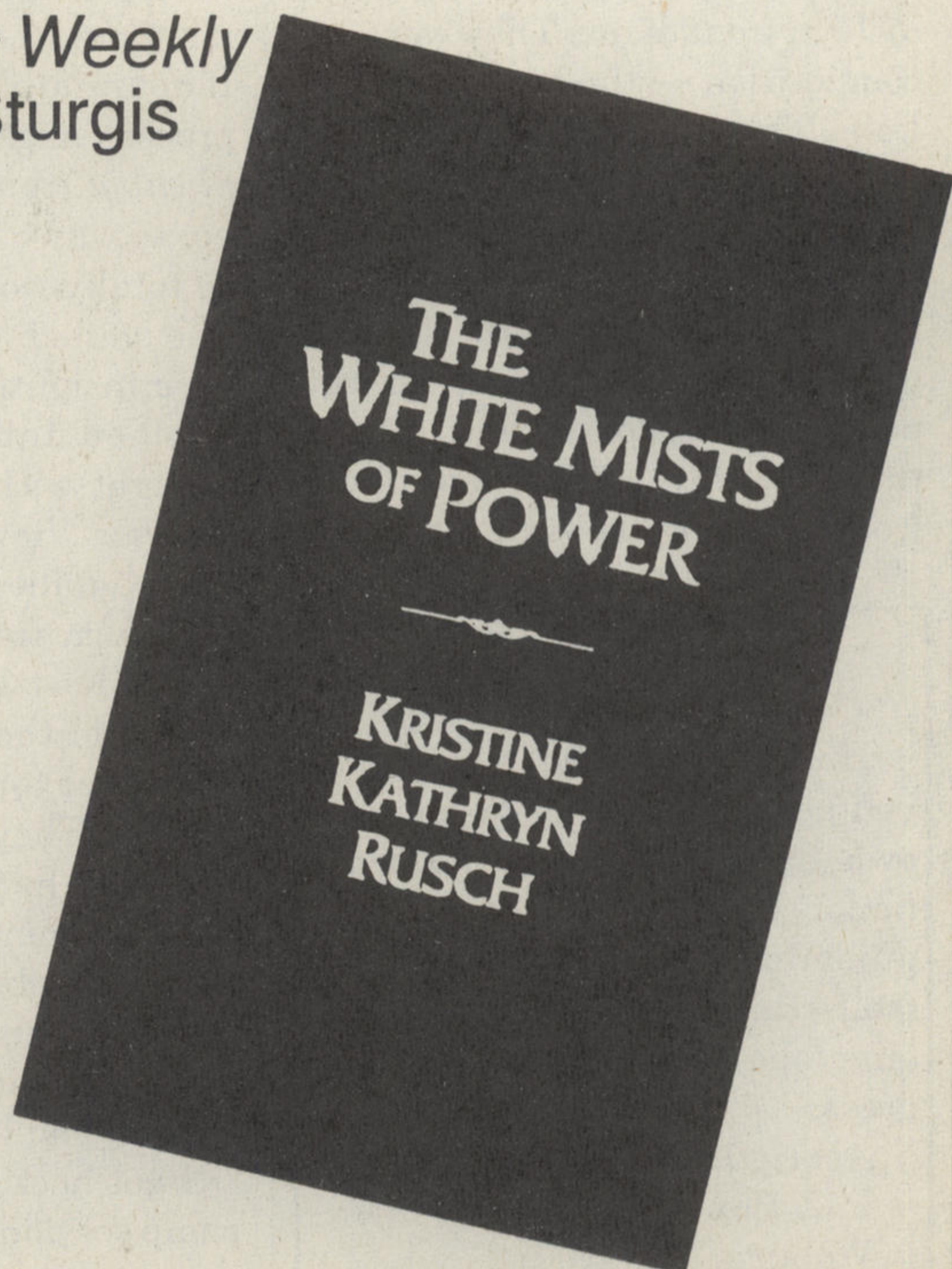
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Day 2

The monotony quickly set in. The only thing that kept me interested, that kept me in the hotel and not wandering into the outside world to see what Boston looked like, was the realization that just before lunch I would have to give my presentation. What I found myself doing was studying the audience, seeing who was asking questions, who was causing trouble, who might be going after the same Federal money I am, knowing they will be lying in wait for me, wanting to trip me up and make me look foolish. I didn't listen to the talks — I listened to the audience. Grad students ask most of the questions. But they don't count — they ask nice and polite questions, simply wanting you to clarify some point, actually wanting to understand something (blessed be the grad students, who in their ignorance and innocence do not understand the political reality that runs the techno-world).

What I was worried about were the three guys grouped just an aisle in front of me. They were my competition — the boys from Bell Labs. They smiled at me. I smiled at them. Please remember that smiling is a form of baring your fangs. Dogs always smile before they rip into one another. I was going to have to go up to the podium and explain that I knew the best way to keep beryllium from diffusing through a transis-

tor. It was my plan to imply that the Bell Labs boys didn't know what they were doing.

But I was ready for them — or at least I hoped so. They had read my abstract; those were handed out when we registered. I *purposefully* left a critical piece of data out of my abstract. The Bell Labs boys knew it was missing, and I hoped they wouldn't be able to let that pass — it would be the perfect opportunity to try to make me look less than competent. I was nervous until the moment my paper was announced, and then I slipped into my *presenter's* persona. I walked up to the podium, smiled, and actually opened with a little joke about a race between a cow and horse (you had to have been there — it actually went quite well), and then I whipped through my View Graphs. I have no memory of this. I never do. And then it was over and time for questions. The Bell Labs boys practically jumped from their seats. They told me it appeared I'd stopped beryllium from diffusing through my transistors, but asked if my new technique was *reliable*? If not *reliable*, they said, then the process might not be all that *applicable* (that is their politically polite way of saying that it would be totally worthless).

I smiled. I thanked them for their insightful question, and then reached into the notebook I'd brought with me, and pulled out *another* View Graph. It showed my reliability results. It was crash and burn time for the Bell Labs boys. Hoist by their own petard. I'd made them my straight men and everyone in the audience knew it. They were gracious about it — they had no choice. That was the high point of the conference for me. To celebrate I took the afternoon off and visited the New England Aquarium — excellent. I recommend it.

I got back that evening for the rump session. This is probably the most surrealistic aspect of any conference. You get fifty Ph.D.s in

a crowded, hot room, pass out beers, and a moderator will try to start an argument. The topic that night was whether to have strained or unstrained quantum wells in a solid state laser. It might sound like a real yawnfest to you, but not to this crowd. The minority contingent in favor of unstrained quantum wells was about as popular as wife-beating Satanists would be on the Phil Donahue show. It was brutal. It was concluded that those who believed in the merits of unstrained quantum well lasers should be sterilized so that their obviously inferior genes would not be passed on. The concluding remark of the evening was made by an unknown grad student from Stanford who, after having far too many beers, threw up in the back row. It was a fitting end.

Day 3

I packed my bags, checked out of the hotel, paid homage to the Insiders, sucked up to the contract monitors one last time, and pretended to listen to that day's talks. But it was impossible. I was burnt to the core. All that mattered was getting to the airport on time. As I flew home, savoring my many victories, I swore I would not do this again in the near future. I swore it. But then I suddenly remembered there was a conference I *had* to go to, and that the abstract was due next Wednesday. I'd forgotten all about it.

I reached the full panic level somewhere over Iowa. □

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Why, Oh Why?

I have no idea why film makers have a lemming-like need to take outdated forty-year-old films and give them a visceral '90's twist. Usually, the originals are so bad that they're deemed "classics." Now, I have a soft spot for "the classic," but to invest millions to remake a 1950's clunker is not my idea of fiscal responsibility. There are exceptions. The Cronenberg version of *The Fly* (1986) was head and shoulders above the '58 film (even with a James Clavell screenplay), as was the '78 *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. But these are more the exceptions than the rule. Remember the ghastly remakes of *The Thing from Another World*, *Invaders from Mars*, and *The Blob*? Which brings me to the next remake in development ... *The Crawling Eye!* Indicative of the period, the 1958 original is an alien invasion movie. Our eponymous alien, with a penchant for decapitation, picks the alpine resort of Trolenberg as the focal point of its invasion. The reasons for its rather rude intrusion are most definitely nefarious but remain unclear throughout the movie. After it terrorizes the guests at the alpine lodge, the hero, played by Forrest Tucker, figures out the alien's weakness (aside from its looks — author Bill Warren, in his book *Keep Watching the Skies!*, describes it as "a cantaloupe with an unpleasantly realistic eye") and makes a quick call to the nearby Air Force, which then rushes in and persuades the alien to rethink its evil yet mystifying plans. It could be a lot worse; just imagine a remake of *Attack of the Giant Leeches!*

Of course, I could be wrong about this idea for a remake; in which case, the only thing to do when cornered about my lack of



A furry handful in *Pet Sematary two*

foresight is to plead demonic possession. Works every time.

Movies

John Carpenter, who was responsible for the remake of *The Thing From Another World*, is turning his eye to another '50's film. In a multi-picture deal with Universal, Carpenter and his wife, Sandy King, will direct, produce, and develop features for the studio, including a remake of *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*.

Screenplay writers Caroline Thompson and Larry Wilson (*The Addams Family*) are much in demand this year. Their list of credits will include the new Michael Jackson fantasy film *Midnight*, due to start filming later this year for Columbia pictures. Jackson plays an omnipresent being who falls prey to an evil doctor's lust for power. Being omnipresent, Jackson eventually thwarts the nasty doctor's plans and sets about using his powers for good. Set designer Anton Furst (*Batman*) was set to work on the film until his tragic death last year.

Not content with a new Michael Jackson film, the writing pair are also rewriting Larry Wilson's

original script for the comic-to-screen translation of *Mai, The Psychic Girl*, to be directed by Tim Burton. The dynamic duo are also writing the screenplay for the wonderful comic character *Concrete*, originally created by Paul Chadwick and published by Dark Horse Comics. This time Tim Burton will produce, while Larry Wilson will make his directorial debut.

Burton, it seems, is also a jack-of-all-trades, turning his sights from fantasy films to a documentary on Hammer horror veteran Vincent Price.

As reported in *The Hollywood Reporter*, Dark Horse Comics and the film company Largo Entertainment have signed an agreement for "an exclusive first-look-deal to develop and produce features based on Dark Horse Comics." Dark Horse publisher Mike Richardson will get a producer's credit on all Largo films based on a Dark Horse character. The *Concrete* film is not part of the "first-look-deal."

Continuing with the comic trend, *Home Alone* writer and producer John Hughes will produce a live-action *Dennis the Menace* for Warner Bros. *Dennis the Menace* will also make his

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theatrical debut in a Broadway play set to open this fall. *Love Boat's* Gavin MacLeod will play neighbor George Wilson.

An impressive who's who of talent are behind the screen adaptation of Winsor McCay's classic newspaper comic strip *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, due in theaters this summer. The artist Moebius and the illustrator Brian Froud (*Dark Crystal*, *Labyrinth*) worked on *Little Nemo's* design; Ray Bradbury is credited with the original screen concept; the screenplay is by Chris Columbus (the producer of *Home Alone*); legendary writer and script doctor Robert Towne (*Chinatown*) is the story consultant; Richard and Robert Sherman (*Mary Poppins* and *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*) have written the songs sung by Melissa Manchester; and lending their voices to the film are Mickey Rooney as Flip and René Auberjonois as Professor Genius. All in all, I hope this film provides some competition for *Batman Returns* and *Aliens 3* this summer.

July 10th sees the release of Ralph Bakshi's *Cool World*. Combining live-action and animation, Kim Basinger plays Holli Wood, leader of a group of animated entities known as "doodles," who invites cartoonist Jack Deeks, played by Gabriel Byrne, into the animated world he created.

Also this summer is the release of *Army of Darkness*. Written by Sam and Ivan Raimi and directed by Sam Raimi (his first film since *Darkman*), this sword and sorcery film stars Bruce Campbell as Ash, a man who is sent to the Dark Ages where he must lead an army of the dead in a quest for their souls.

Disney is sticking with the tried and true formula for family films with a re-release of the animated classic *Pinocchio*; *Honey, I Blew Up the Kid*; and an animated retelling of the fantasy *Aladdin*, with Robin Williams as the voice of the Genie. Worth the price of admission alone.

The Capital City distribution magazine, *Internal Correspondence*, has reported that James Cameron has signed to write and direct a *Spider-Man* movie. If *Spider-Man* turns out to have the Cameron touch, next in line could be a live-action *X-Men* movie.

It seems that Hal Foster's Prince Valiant is getting yanked by his leggings into the '90s. The writing-producing team of Michael Beckner and Jim Gorman are currently working on the budgeted \$50 million *Prince Valiant* for the newly formed Constantin Films. Scott Kramer, head of creative and business affairs for Constantin Films, has described the upcoming film as "*Lethal Weapon* set in a period piece." First to go will be Valiant's trademark pageboy haircut, but our hero does get to keep his singing, vibrating sword. Definitely a '90's man.

Alan Brennert, the executive story consultant for the second *Twilight Zone* series, will debut his play *Weird Romance* at the WPA theater, New York, this May. Based on his story "Her Pilgrim Soul" (also filmed as a *Twilight Zone* episode) and James Tiptree Jr.'s "The Girl Who Was Plugged In", the stage musical will feature music by Alan Menken (*The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast*) and lyrics by David Spencer.

The Grand Guignol style of theater, using the themes of violence, horror, and sadism, originated in the Parisian cabarets of the 19th century. These short plays of hauntings, murder, and mutilations were probably given the name Grand Guignol because the stories used resembled the plots used by the popular French puppet Guignol. This respected style of "theater of the macabre" is scheduled to premiere this summer in Los Angeles, moving to New York in 1993. Production of the *Grand Guignol* is headed by Craig Strong, Randy Bennett, and

Douglas S. Cramer, and features the writing talents of Wes Craven, Robert Bloch, Richard Christian Matheson, and David Schow.

Another example of the Grand Guignol style of theater is the Stephen Sondheim musical *Sweeney Todd*. The film version of *Sweeney Todd*, the demon barber, will eventually be directed by Tim Burton and written for the screen by Caroline Thompson.

To whet your appetite, Roger Corman will bring you *Munchies II*, written and directed by Jim Wynorski, and *Watchers III*. Other sequels in the pipeline include *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles 3*, which will begin production this summer for a spring 1993 release; *The Addams Family 2*; *Pet Sematary II*; and *Nudist Colony of the Dead II: Zealot's Revenge*, also *Nudist Colony of the Dead II: The Remake*.

Films in production:

The new independent company, Prince Productions, is currently lensing a vampire feature called *Thirst*. Budgeted at \$1.5 million, the film co-stars Michael Nader and TV's Robey (*Friday the 13th*).

The spate of bloodsucking continues with the upcoming video feature of *Kingdom of the Vampire*. Writer Matthew Jason Walsh will write and appear in the Suburban Tempe Co. production.

In the pipeline from Mutual General Pictures are *Harry Coffin: Vampire Hunter* and *The Dwelling* (where unwary tenants become the victims of satanic rituals).

And if you're not sick of the undead by now, you can throw in *Sorority House Vampires* and *Samurai Vampire Bikers from Hell* for good measure.

Proving you should check out the fine print in your condo lease is the suspense-horror film *Leprechaun*. Written and directed by Mark Jones, the plot revolves around a family terrorized by the

inhabitant of a strange crate discovered in their new home. The film will be released later this year.

More real estate problems for a family in Disney's *You Should See the Conklins' Living Room* by first-time screenwriter Robert Newcombe. The film is a live-action comedy described as a cross between *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids* and "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" segment of *Fantasia*. This time, the objects of a house come alive to seek revenge on the children of the family.

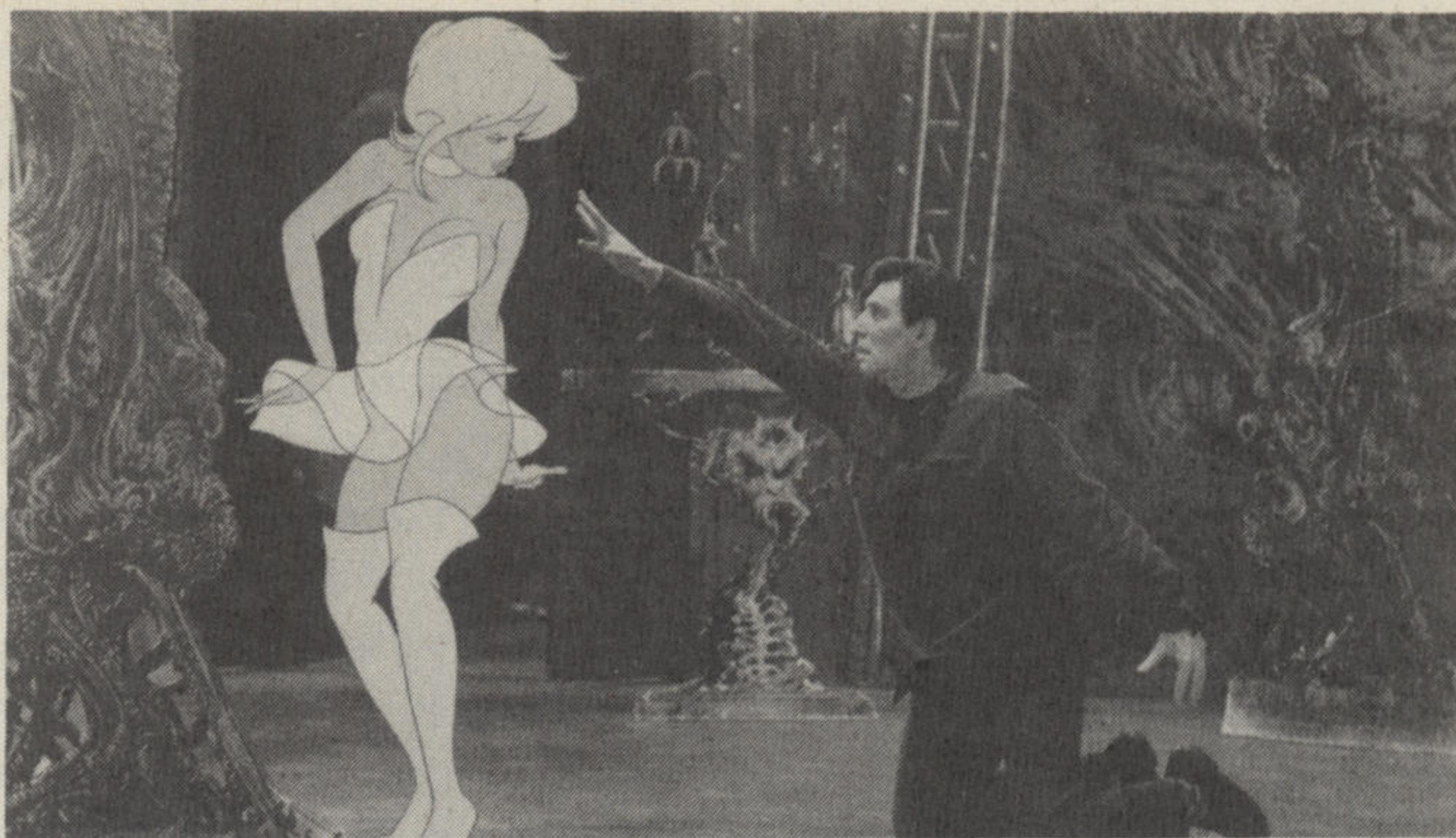
The *Witchcraft* series of films has garnered increasingly large video sales figures with each new release. Vista Street Entertainment's *Witchcraft IV*, currently in production, will be distributed straight to the domestic video market. Due to the success of the film series, the company is developing an hour long *Witchcraft* TV anthology series using a central reappearing character.

New York, 100 years in the future, is the backdrop for the thriller *Hammerhead*, currently being filmed. Budgeted at \$16 million, the film is written and directed by Avi Nesher for another recently formed independent company, Falcon Film Finance, Ltd.

The year is 2020 for *Nemesis*, where cyborgs are planning to replace world leaders with cyborg counterparts. The film stars Oliver Gruner as the American intelligence agent out to stop them.

Along with a four picture development deal with Propaganda Films, Clive Barker has finished an original science fiction-fantasy feature for Universal, which he will also direct, called *Eden, U.S.A.*

Reported in *Publishers Weekly* for June 1st: TriStar Pictures, on behalf of Roven-Cavallo Entertainment, has purchased the rights to Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy. The agreement states that the company can produce one



theatrical release using materials from *Foundation*, *Foundation and Empire*, and *Second Foundation*. Also included in the contract is an option on the additional novels *Prelude to Foundation*, *Foundation's Edge*, *Foundation and Earth*, and the forthcoming *Forward the Foundation*, plotted but only partially written at the time of Dr. Asimov's recent passing. The overall agreement includes TV rights, merchandising, video games, and a possible sequel.

The Arthurian legend is next to get the *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* action-adventure treatment. David and Jerry Zucker (*Ghost*) are developing *First Knight* for Sony Pictures Entertainment. Written by Lorne Cameron and first time screenwriter David Hoselton, *First Knight* is the story of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table told from the point of view of Lancelot.

Published in June, *The Forever King* by Molly Cochran and Warren Murphy has already been optioned for film with the screenplay to be written by Murphy. The *Forever King* is a 10-year-old Chicago boy who finds the Holy Grail and discovers he is the reincarnation of King Arthur. His quest leads him to England and the evil Black Knight.

Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park* will start production in September 1992, with a planned release date of summer '93. Budgeted at \$50 million, this Spielberg-directed movie is expected to be Universal's hit of

summer '93. Before starting on *Jurassic Park*, Spielberg will direct a feature length *Zorro*.

Crichton is also adapting his new murder mystery novel *Rising Sun* for the screen. Phillip Kaufman will direct the feature, which Twentieth Century Fox hopes will start filming later this year.

Twentieth Century Fox has also acquired the rights to *The Rocky Horror Picture Show II: Revenge of the Old Queen*. Richard O'Brien, who wrote the 1975 cult classic, has written the screenplay, music, and lyrics for the sequel. Also on board are the original producers, Lou Adler and Michael White.

From Trimark comes a sequel to the successful low-budget film *Warlock* and *Citizen Sane*, a TV superhero spoof where the heroes of a TV show don their capes to fight real life bad guys.

If Arnold Schwarzenegger can play Danny De Vito's twin with ease, then playing a tooth fairy in the upcoming *Sweet Tooth* should prove no problem. Although no contracts have been signed, the film is now being developed for the star power of Schwarzenegger, who will play a pet groomer who inherits the job of the tooth fairy on his father's deathbed. Since there is no formal deal, Schwarzenegger has the option of passing on the project if the final script, currently being written by Holly Sloan, is not to his liking.

Warner Bros. and Spielberg's Amblin Entertainment have optioned the novel *Phantom* by British romance writer Susan

Kay for feature development. *Phantom* tells the story of Erik's early life before he became the much troubled Phantom of the Opera.

Last year saw the limited release of a 35mm director's cut version of *Blade Runner*. This fall, Warner Bros. and Ridley Scott hope to release a 70mm director's cut of the film which would include additional scenes, some re-scoring of music, and the removal of much of Harrison Ford's voice-over narration. The only setback to the release of this 70mm version would be the availability of a grain-free print. If producing a 70mm print becomes unfeasible, Warner Bros. plans to release the film nationwide in a 35mm version.

Television

Frustration is pandemic these pre-production days at the new *Conan the Adventurer* animated series. What with the ethical paralysis of studios and networks and toy companies backing these various new series, a widespread cowardice and naked fear of the Fundamentalists Christians, who lie in wait for every new "children's series" so they can justify their tyranny over Freedom of Speech, each new series becomes blander and blander, dopier and dopier, as the production companies and local stations tie themselves in knots not to offend *anyone* (even those who *deserve* to be offended).

Conan is apparently the most obvious victim at the moment. Because Hasbro has the toy figure rights, they have put into work a series to be distributed by Claster, story edited by Christy Marx (*The Sisterhood of Steel*), and produced by Will Meugniot (co-creator with Mark Evanier of the mid-'80's Eclipse comic *DNAgents*). The first thirteen episodes have been sent in for storyboarding, but the restrictions placed on the writers

by Claster and Hasbro seem to have driven even the most phlegmatic and malleable to the heights of hysteria:

Conan, who almost always operated alone, has been forced to take on a coterie of associates, side-boys, supporting players, and just all-around space-fillers: one black character, one female character, one happy puppy, three infants, a nanny, and a partridge in a pear tree. Every adventure has to include these spear-carriers because (surprise!) Hasbro wants to promote the little Toys-R-Us doll figures. Conan can't be attacked by a saber-tooth tiger, because He-Man rides a saber-tooth tiger. No demons, or devils, or magic, because the Bible-Thumpers will perceive it as Satanism. And, since Conan's only two skills are wenching and fighting, and these have been kept to a saucy wink and occasional noogie, insiders are referring to the series as Conan the Castrato. The word upfront is that this series will die a nasty crib-death.

It looks like a green light for Hanna-Barbera to produce 13 new animated episodes of *The Addams Family* for the ABC network. The series is set to air Saturday mornings, beginning in September.

G-Force is the latest TV series from *Thunderbirds* creator Gerry Anderson. In a co-production deal with the Russian firm ACTIS, the animated series will be developed and written in Britain and animated at the St. Petersburg studios in Russia. Work has already started on the first thirteen episodes of the series which cross-pollinates *Thunderbirds* and *Fireball XL-5* to come up with a family rescue team — in space.

Although there are no plans for any new *The Adventures of Superboy*, Alexander and Ilya Salkind have every reason to break open the champagne. The Salkinds recently filmed the 100th episode of the *Superboy* series. This centennial mark is the required number of episodes needed for a series

to recoup its finances in the strip marketplace. A show will not usually make money on its first run; only by being stripped (*i.e.*, cut down in length) does a show make back its outlay. There are three reasons for this. In primetime, a 1/2-hour show is actually about 26 minutes in film length, the rest of the time is used for advertising. By stripping a show, the length is cut by up to 10 minutes, increasing the advertising length for that 30 minute block and thereby increasing incoming money. In syndication, the reason for stripping a show is slightly different. Since the show is usually already a shorter length, the 100-episode mark is needed to amortize sets and production costs (*i.e.*, a *Superboy* set is more cost effective over 100 episodes than 10 episodes). And finally, a high total of episodes is needed for sale to a greater number of domestic and overseas stations. No station is going to buy a series with only 10 episodes, because once a viewing public has seen these 10 shows they will turn off and the station loses both the viewers and the paying advertisers.

The stripped *Superboy* series is scheduled to air in the 1992-1993 season.

Short takes: *Twilight Zone* alumni Jim Crocker and George R.R. Martin are developing a science fiction-adventure pilot for Columbia TV called *Doors*. In work is an American version of the BBC television series *Red Dwarf*. *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* and *The Untouchables* are two of Paramount's high profile new series to air next year.

And to round out this issue:

The Sci-Fi Channel looks like it will debut this fall thanks to the acquisition of the much beleaguered channel by the USA Network. As well as original programming, initial shows to be aired will include *Star Trek*, *Friday the 13th: The Series*, *Buck Rogers*, *The Six Million Dollar Man*, and *The Bionic Woman*. □

The Black and White Perspective



Our veteran *Aboriginal* artists are having to adjust to the new black-and-white format. The ones I spoke with seemed to be taking it in stride, and even pointing out some advantages.

Lori Deitrick says she likes the control she got using pencil. She says her husband David Deitrick put a lot of thought into how to make his black-and-white illustrations as vibrant without the use of color and was happy with the result. It also took them less time to



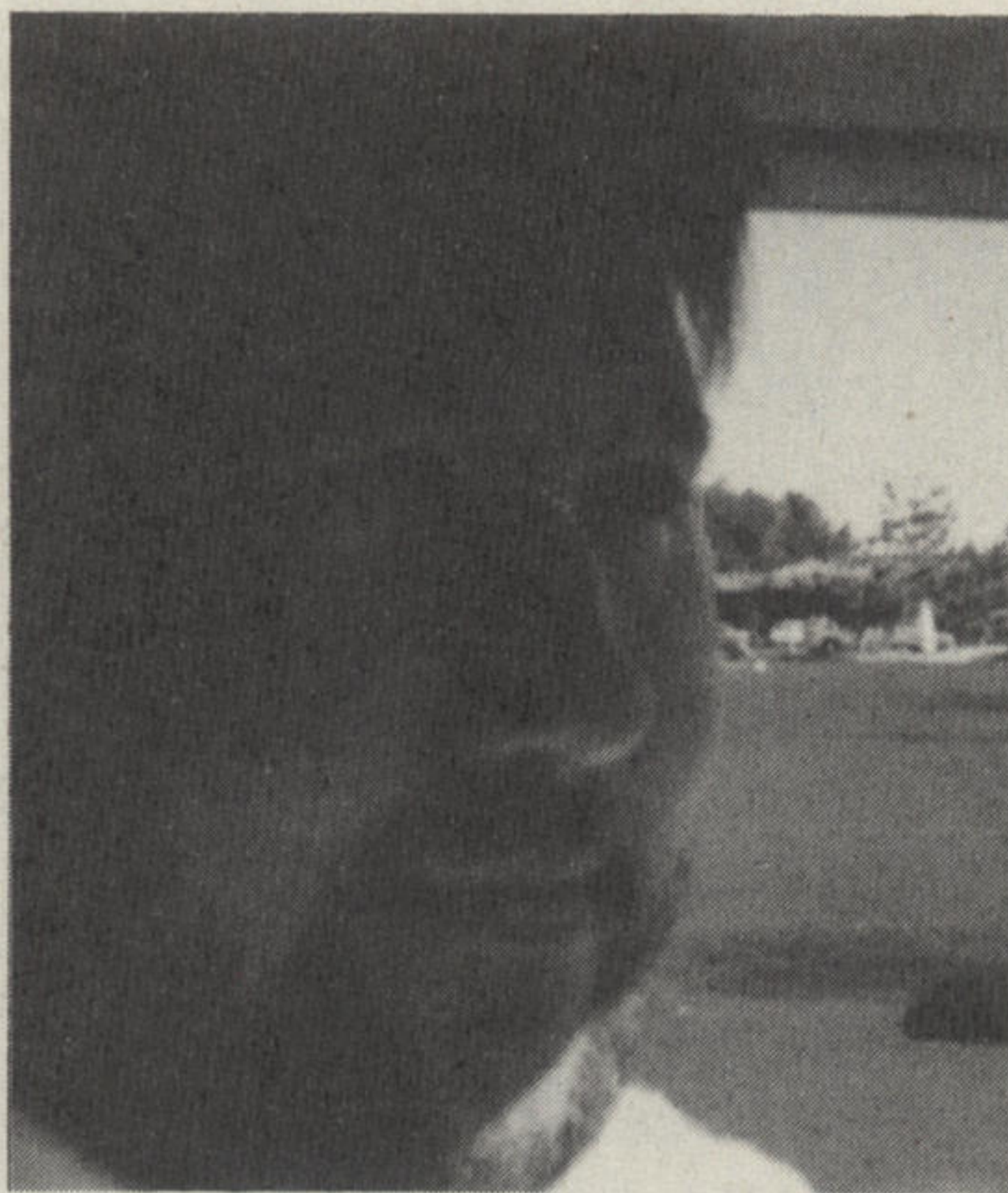
Wendy Wheeler

complete their work. Cortney Skinner says the time factor makes black-and-white illustrations more cost-effective for artists. Larry Blamire says he went back to pencil work, which he hasn't done for years. And Charles Lang says for him, the bottom line is that *Aboriginal* still exists.



Lori Deitrick

A time researcher relives her own child abuse in the story "June 14, 1959" by Wendy Wheeler. Texas resident Wheeler is a technical editor who is making her first appearance in *Aboriginal*. Last December's issue of *Analog* carried her story "The Black Mother," and her "Cup of Chaos" appears in the Ace anthology *The Crafters*. She has finished her first novel and is working on a collaboration with two dif-



Jerry J. Davis

ferent men.

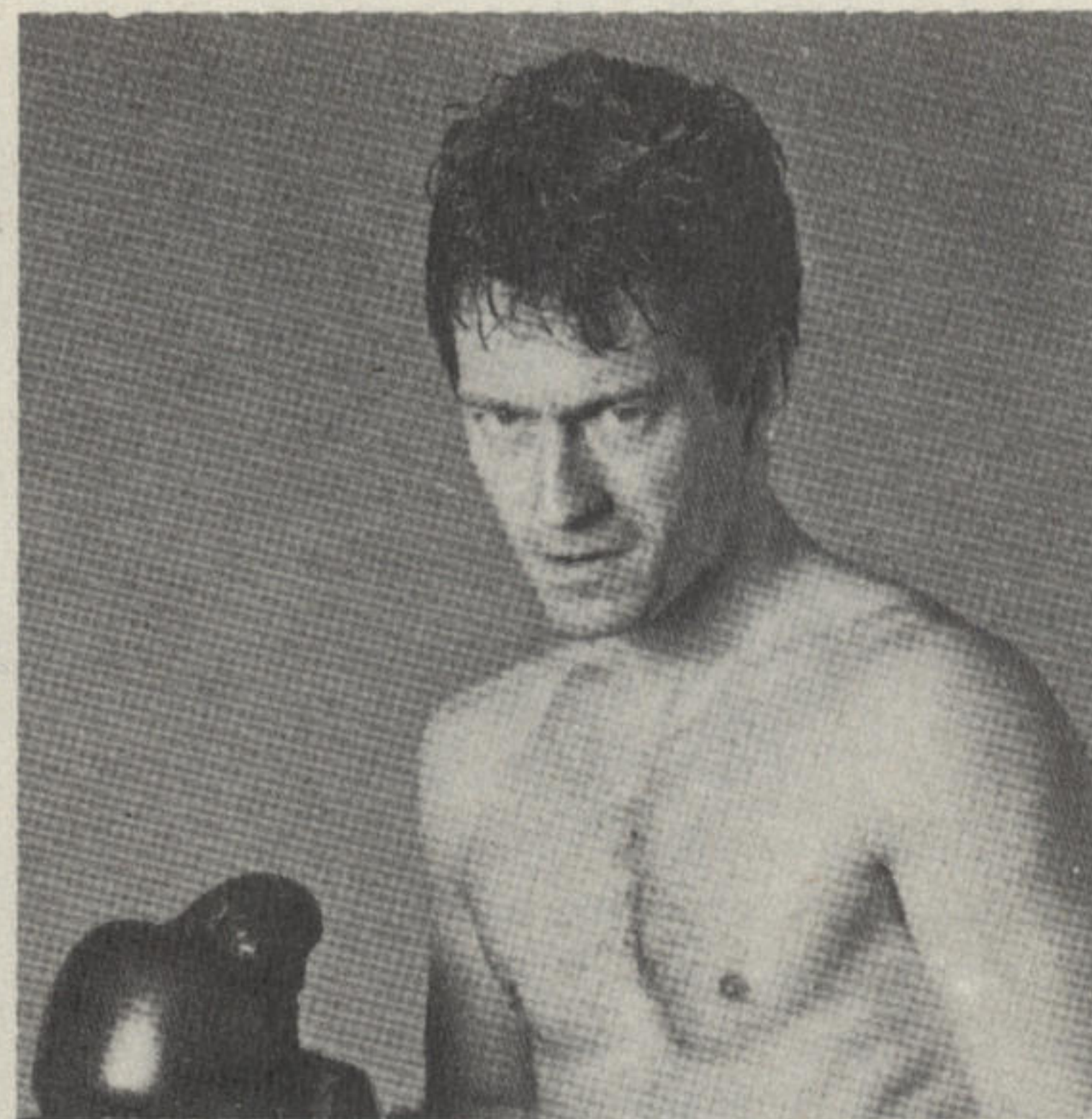
"June 14, 1959" is illustrated by *Aboriginal* newcomer Peggy Ranson. Ranson is an *Illustrators of the Future* award winner who was just nominated for the second time for a Hugo in the fan art category.

She is a graphic designer who started out as a fashion illustrator. She always loved SF but didn't think of becoming an SF illustrator until she stumbled onto a convention in New Orleans. She is now doing work for *Pulphouse*, among others.

A human survivor of an attack finds an ally as he tries to escape death from marauding aliens in "The Claim Station" by Gerald W. Page. Page is a writer and editor who worked for *TV Guide* for 20 years. He made his first SF sale to John Campbell at *Analog*, a 1963 story called "The Happy Man."

Page edited DAW's *Year's Best Horror* series for four years and has been an

editor for *Witchcraft and Sorcery* and consultant editor of *Amazing Stories*. His most recent stories appear in the anthology *When Black Lotus Blooms*, edited by Elizabeth Saunders and published by Unnameable Press. Page's work has appeared in numerous magazines. He writes about and collects pulp magazines of almost every genre and says he has the distinction of being the only person to attend every SF fan

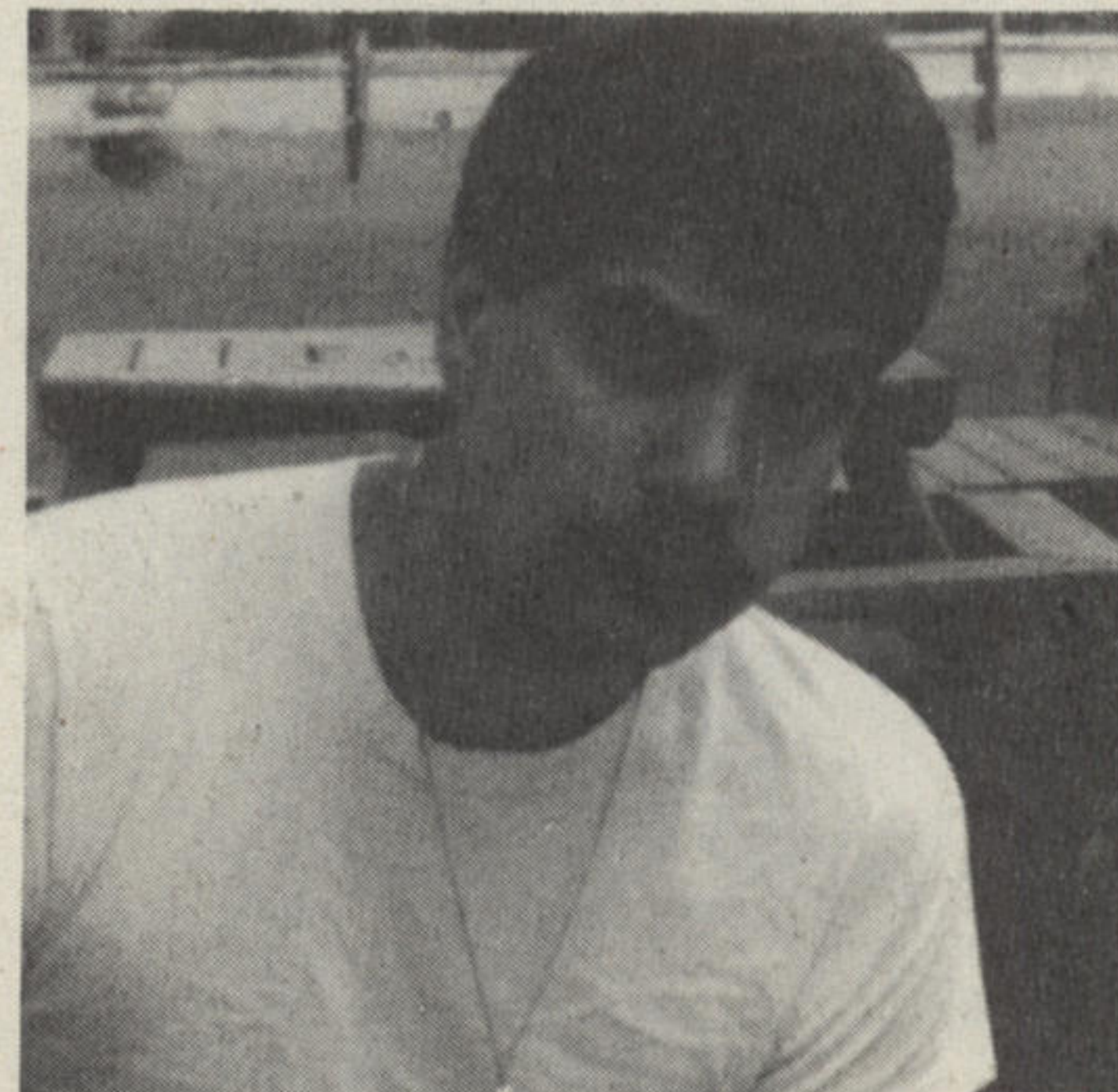


Larry Blamire

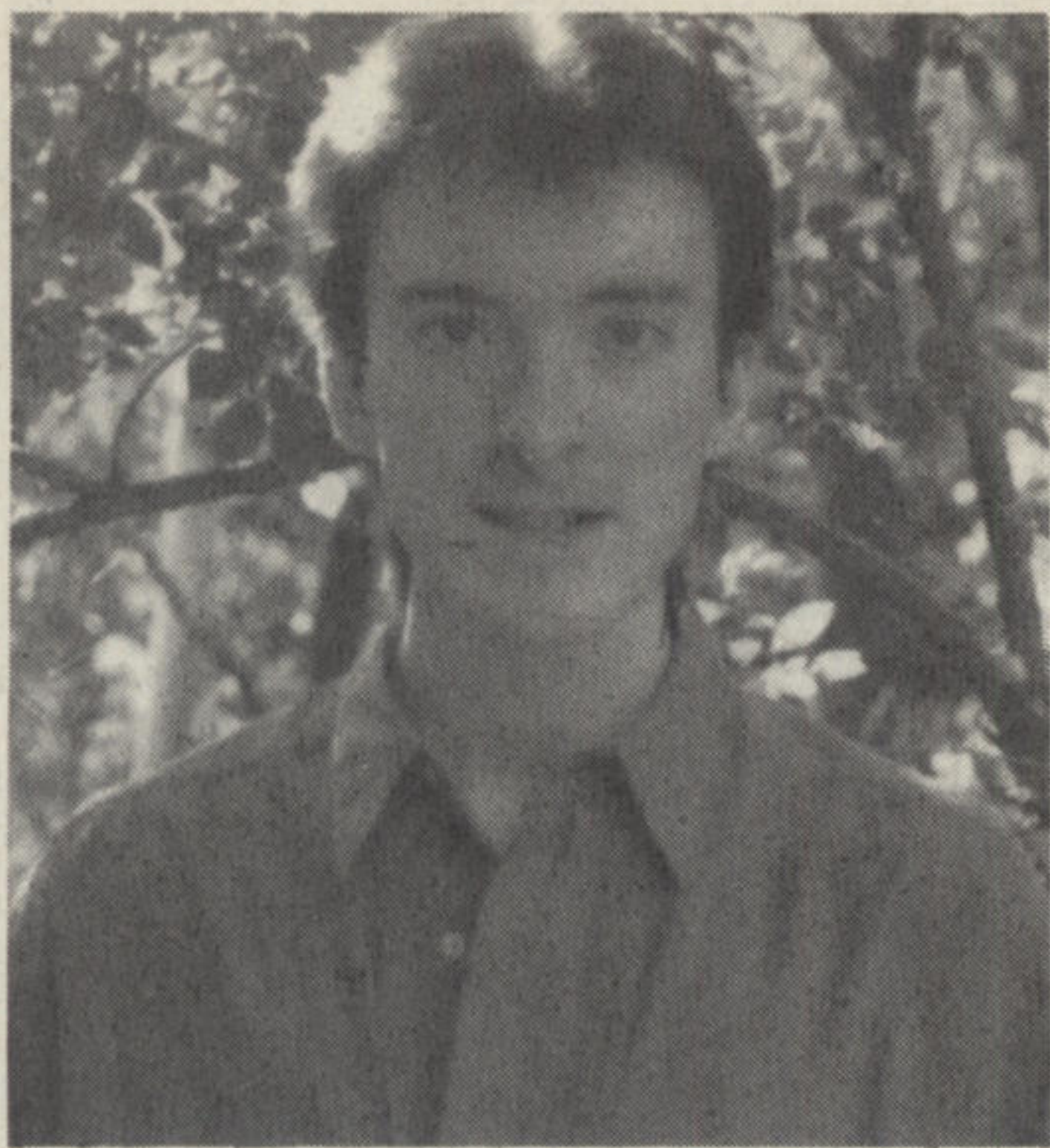
convention ever held in Atlanta.

"The Claim Station" is illustrated by Alan Gutierrez. Gutierrez has just added *Aboriginal* to a list of clients that spans seven countries and includes Berkley/Ace Books, Baen Books, *Popular Mechanics*, *Analog*, Tonka Toys, Steve Jackson Games, and NASA, to name just a few.

He has been artist guest of honor at



Jamil Nasir



John Randal

conventions that include Amigocon 6 and Bubonicon 23. His work has toured the U.S. and been featured in New York gallery presentations.

In "The Penalties of Pirating," author **Jerry J. Davis** brings us the software program from hell. Davis makes a living "fooling around with computers and databases." (So, Mr. Davis, perhaps guilt, or, hmmm, revenge had something to do with this story??)

Davis is working on an SF novel called *Paris* and has a novel called *My Dinner with Castro* being serialized in *Stifled Yawn* magazine (Yes, he says, he's serious) published by E.G. Press.

"The Penalties of Pirating" is illustrated by **Larry Blamire**. Blamire is involved with a new theater company named Theatre 9. Its first project is called "Larry Blamire's Sketch-O-Rama," a batch of eight comedy sketches Larry wrote and directed. The benefit performances for the new theatre company took place in June at the Waring School in Beverly, Massachusetts.

Blamire's dinner theater play *Asteroid Murders* has been enjoying a long run in Shrewsbury, Massachusetts.

An alien virus that turns humans into zombies is the subject of **Jamil Nasir's** "Sunlight." Nasir made his professional debut with the equally creepy "The Darkness Beyond" in

Aboriginal (May-June 1988).

Nasir is a Maryland lawyer who has written numerous short stories and is finishing a novel called *Quasar*. Asked to name an interesting thing he has done lately, he wrote that he "figured out why a belief in a spiritual realm is justified by the same principles of knowledge that underlie science. Before breakfast."

"Sunlight" is illustrated by **Allison Fiona Hershey**, another *Aboriginal* newcomer. Hershey is a 1989 co-winner of the *Illustrators of the Future* competition. She has illustrated several software packages and computer games. She is currently working on a children's SF storybook called *Shania Sunfox* and a series of acrylic works called *Shine the Stone* involving the juxtaposition of cave art and technology.

In the future world of "Dead Cows" by **John W. Randal**, decay is the number one fashion statement. Randal made his professional debut with "Liquid Jade" in *Aboriginal* (Jan.-Feb. 1990). Randal says he got the idea for the title of this



Amy Benesch

latest story from a Colorado souvenir shop selling cow skulls that had a sign out front: "Dead cows on sale here."

When I spoke to him he had just sold his tenth story, to *Amazing Stories*, and was working on his first novel. He is also collaborating with another writer for the first time and trying to write one story a month. He says "Dead Cows" was "just a sick idea" that turned out to be "fun to write."

Charles Lang illustrated "Dead Cows." When I spoke to him, Lang was one third of the way through a mega-project which he said he is not free to talk about, except to say it involved fifty-two paintings. He had also finished his ninth cover in a row for *Cemetery Dance* magazine. His wife, **Wendy Snow-Lang**, has now written and illustrated six issues of her horror comic book *Night's Children*.

Transference between patient and therapist takes an SF twist in "I Love You for Seventy Mental Reasons" by



Patricia Anthony

Amy Benesch. This is Benesch's first professional sale. ("Thank you. Thank you. Thank you," she says.)

The New York head-hunter got her start taking a class at The New School with **Shawna McCarthy**. She has a master's degree in drama and her favorite things include *film noir*, skinny dipping, and getting published.

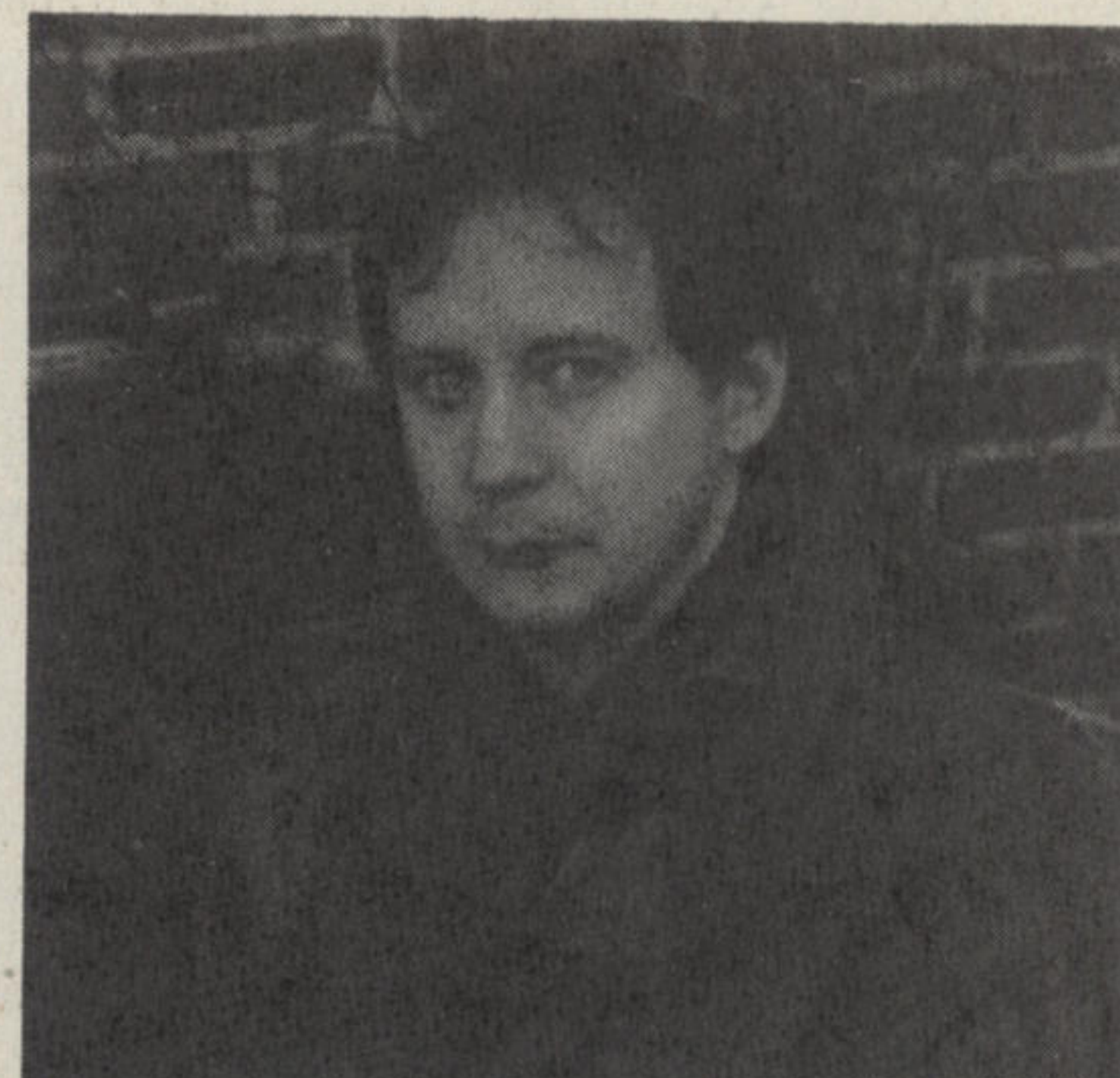
"I Love You ..." is illustrated by **Larry Blamire**.

"The Secret Language of Old White Ladies" by **Patricia Anthony** is a story about prejudice. By my count, this is Anthony's tenth story for *Aboriginal*. She says prejudice in the South, where she grew up, is "weird," and even her liberal Democrat friends think nothing of telling racial jokes.

When I spoke to her, Pat was waiting to get her galleys for her war novel *Cold Allies*, and was thrilled about the design of the pages and jacket. "It's real pretty," she says.

"The Secret Language ..." is illustrated by **Cortney Skinner**. Skinner was working on paintings for WorldCon when I spoke to him. He and author **Geary Gravel** have gotten together a proposal for a comic book.

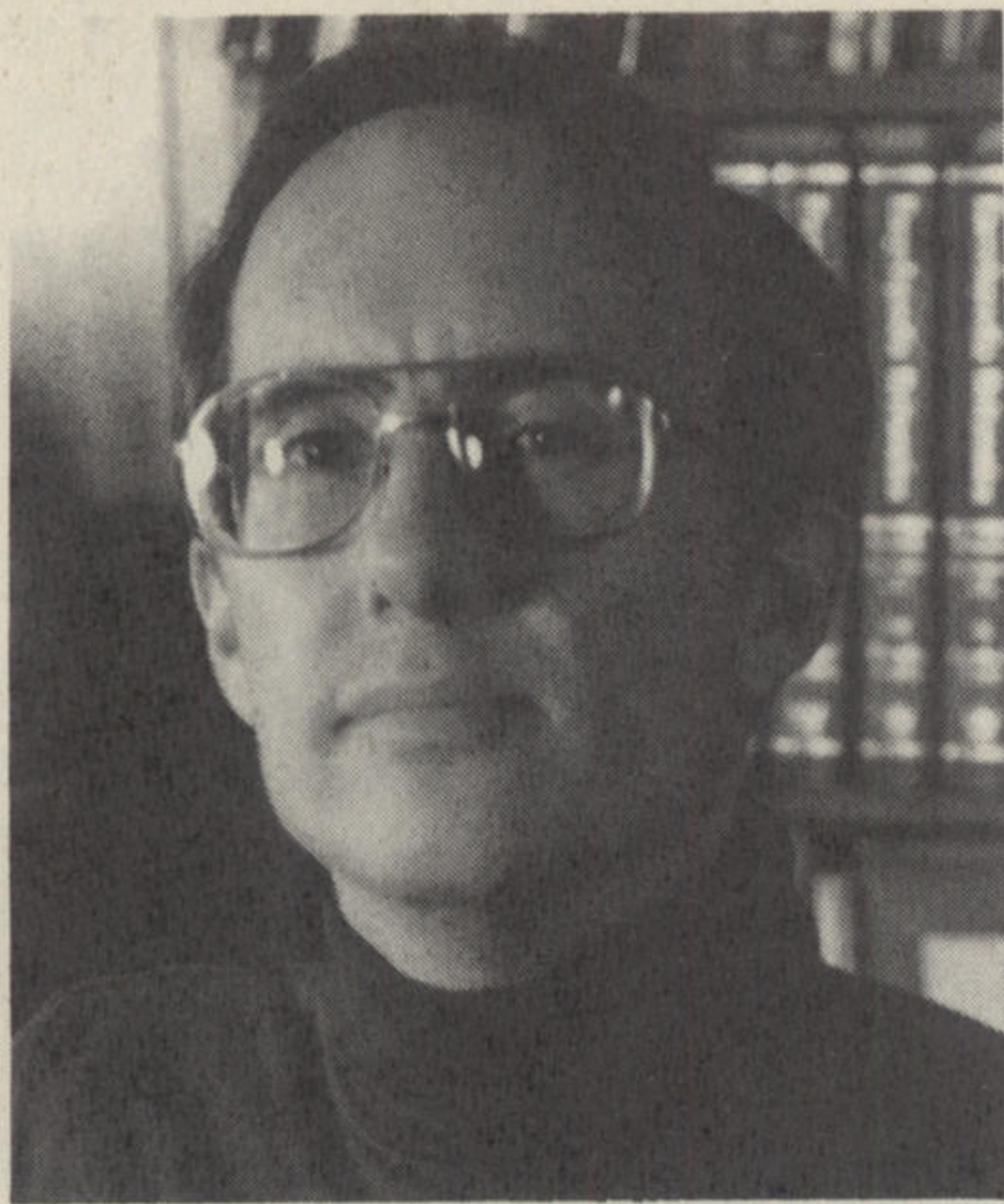
Skinner lives with artist **Julia Smith**, who specializes in modern pottery using traditional methods, and reproductions of 17th- and 18th-Century pottery. There is a big demand for



Cortney Skinner



Charles Lang's head



R. Gary Raham

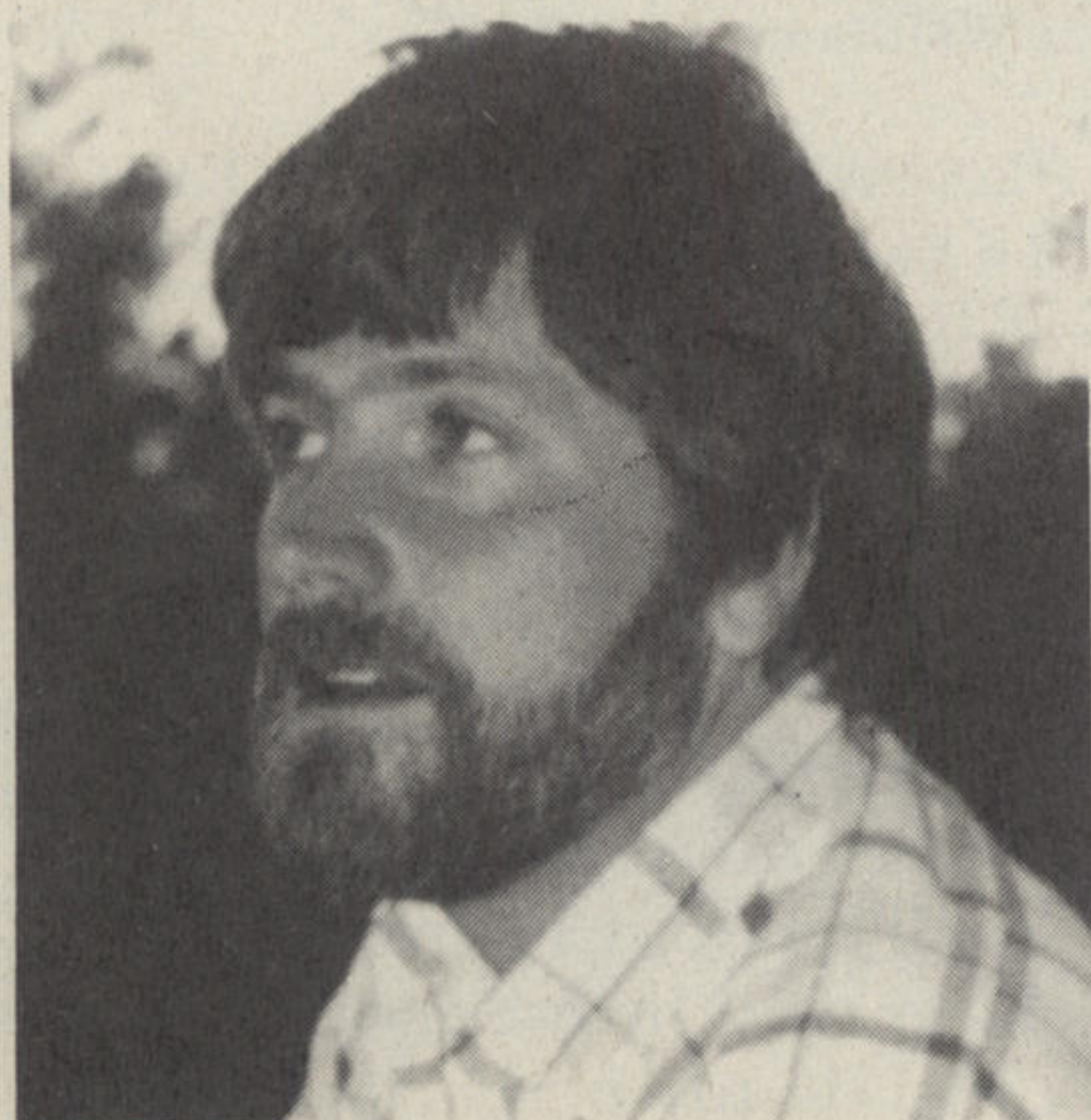
her work from museums and historic sites, and the author of a leading reference book on historic pottery recently called Smith's work the closest she has seen to the real thing.

In the corporate future of the story "Succession," things are slightly more brutal than they are today. Getting to the top of the ladder involves a formalized ritual of assassination. "Succession" is written and illustrated by **R. Gary Raham**.

Raham got his start by taking a creative writing course, then joining a Denver SF writers' group. He is also a graphic artist and illustrator for a printing company. "Succession" is his first SF sale, and he says he "would like to specialize in the field as it is one of my first loves."

He has written articles for *Highlights for Children* and the Rocky Mountain Raptor Program, among others. He is the author of children's fiction and several other SF short stories.

A family must make adjustments for the imminent homecoming of a family member in "Set a Place for Arthur" by **Steven M. Ford**. "Set a Place ..." is Ford's first professional sale. The California systems programmer says he just came home from work one day and started writing. He has a couple of other short stories completed and making the rounds. Ford is married and has a small



Steven M. Ford

daughter. Dad took her camping when she was 18 months old and spent three nights shooing black bears away from the camp because she likes to throw her food around.

"Set a Place for Arthur" is illustrated by **Lori Deitrick**.

"Spin" by **K.D. Wentworth** is a coming-of-age story in a future where street punks are also hackers. Wentworth is the author of "Due Process" (Dec. 1991). When I spoke to her she had just sold stories to the anthology *Journeys to the Twilight Zone, Vol I* edited by Martin Greenberg and Carol Serling, and the magazines *Pulphouse* and *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. She says "Things are picking up steam — now if I could just sell a novel."

She is also very proud that her Akita, Sammy (short for Samurai T. Dog), is going to be the dog guest of honor at OKon in Tulsa.

"Spin" is illustrated by **N. Taylor Blanchard**. He was working on some private commissions and getting ready



K. D. Wentworth

for WorldCon when I spoke to him. He says his girlfriend gave him a motorcycle for his birthday and he's having a blast. He plans to paint a mural on its gas tank, the way he did on the hood of his car.

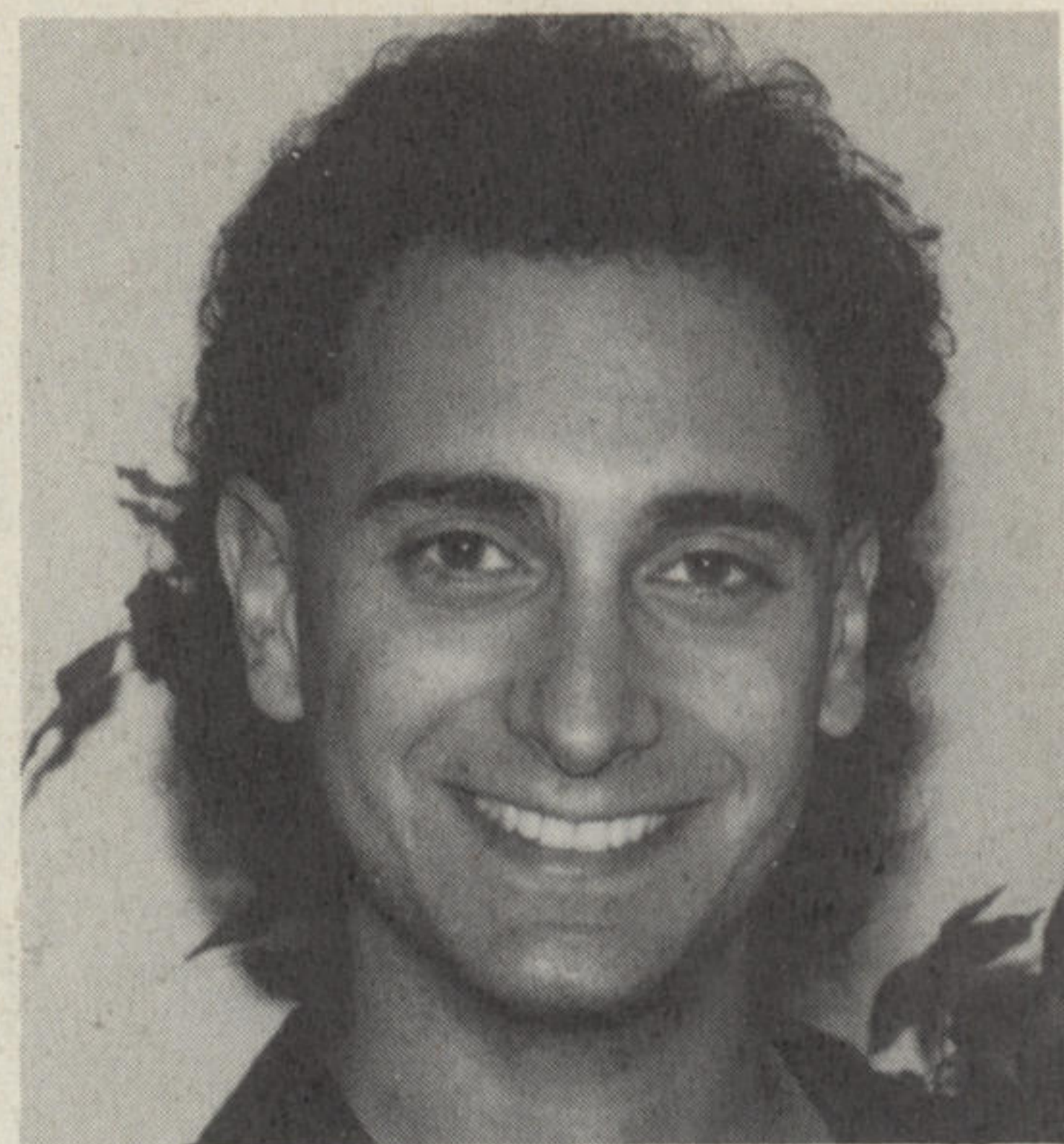
"Ping Enclosed" is a story within a story within a story by **Robert V. Kozinets**. This is Kozinets's first fiction sale. He also has a novel called *Out of the Neon Gloom* waiting to be published, and is working on a "best-seller" called *The Way of the Tiger*.

Kozinets has an MBA and "believe it or not, I'm a tax consultant and management strategist." He lives in Toronto.

"Ping Enclosed" is illustrated by **David Deitrick**.

"Deezee" is a story of a quiet love between a human and alien that changes. "Deezee" is written by **James C. Glass**, who also wrote "Jet Dancer" (*Aboriginal* Sept.-Oct., 1990).

Glass has sold ten stories to small presses. He has a story coming out in *Pulphouse* and another in an upcoming



Robert V. Kozinets

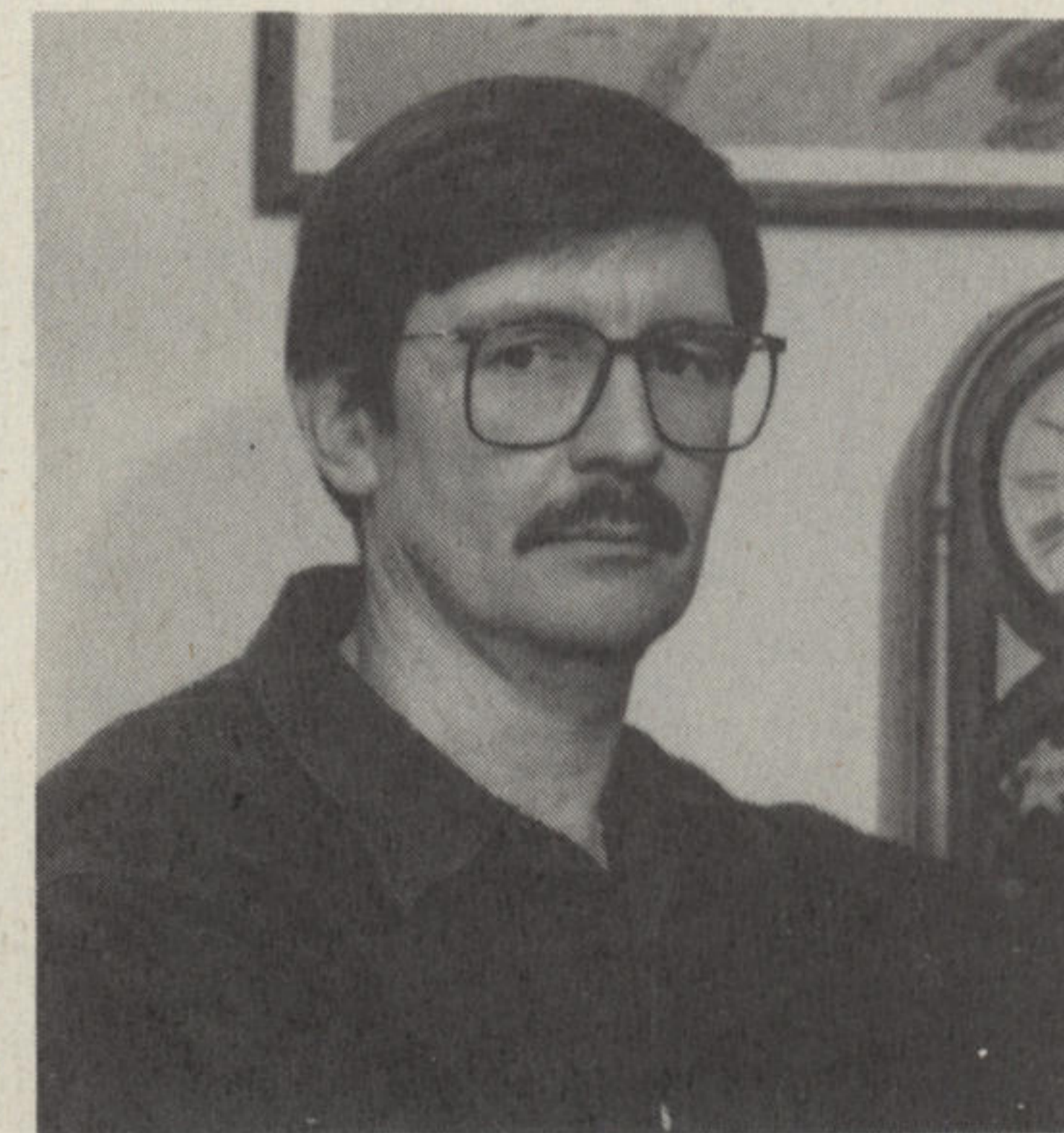
issue of *Aboriginal*. Glass is Dean of Sciences, Mathematics, and Technology at Eastern Washington University. Despite his physics Ph.D., he says he tends to write sociological stories of the human condition. When I spoke to him, he was working on a new novel.

"Deezee" is illustrated by **Jon Foster**, a graduate of the Rhode Island School of Design. This is Foster's first SF sale. He lives in the same town as **Bob Eggleton** who, he says, introduced him to *Aboriginal*. He says he's thrilled to be working in the genre of his "true love."

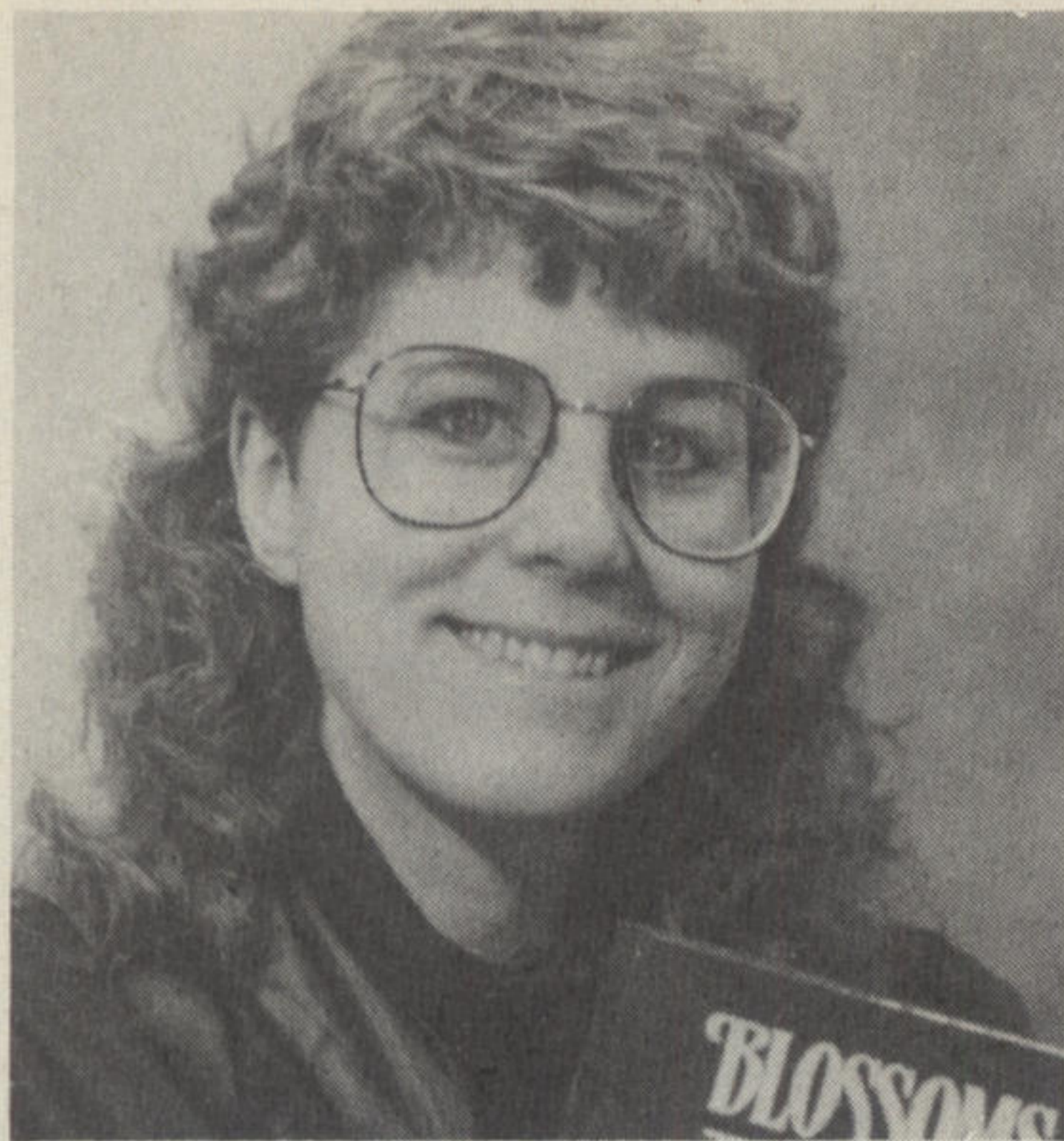
This is the second issue featuring **Jerry Fuchs's** "Rat Race". Fuchs (rhymes with books) is a Midwesterner who came to school out East to learn graphic design and stayed. You can catch some of his cartoons in *Omni* and *Artist's* magazines.

He says he got the idea for "Rat Race" when he read that rats and cockroaches survived, and even thrived, in a radiation environment. Without using any words, Fuchs intends to reveal more about this post-holocaust world he has created.

"Godlet" is a poem by a woman with a beautiful and unusual first name, **Laurel Winter**. Her short story "Biodegradable" appeared in *Tales of the Unanticipated*, and another short story of hers was part of *Minnesota Trivia*.



Richard Hescoc



Laurel Winter

She is working on a juvenile fantasy novel, some picture books, and more SF/fantasy poetry. Winter got her start writing poetry for holiday parties in her one-room country day school in Montana.

"The Poet's New Mind" is by **Marianne J. Dyson**. Dyson is an aerospace consultant and writer who was a certified NASA flight controller. She and her husband were the first married couple to work in the front room of Mission Control at Johnson Space Center. She says she decided to become an astrogator after reading Heinlein's *Starman Jones* in the fifth grade. After leaving NASA to raise a family, she began writing seriously.

Her story "The Critical Factor" appeared in the February 1992 *Analog*. She has poems due out in several anthologies and magazines including the *Magazine of Speculative Poetry*.

The cover illustration for this issue is by **Richard Hescox**, who received a BFA from the Art Center College of Design in 1972, a school also attended by **Michael Whelan**, **David Mattingly**, and **Paul Chadwick**.

Originally painted for Del Rey Books our cover also was the cover for *The Earth is all that Lasts*, a novel by Catherine Wells. Hescox has done production, prop, poster, and advertising paintings for movies, and began his career doing Marvel B&W horror magazines. □



Marianne J. Dyson

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A double issue

Please remember that this is a double issue, with twice as many stories as we normally publish. Because of that it will count as two issues on your subscription.

We plan to publish four double issues this year, including this one.

A missing Aardvark?

The Alien Publisher has misplaced his aardvark. The aardvark had been seeking a companion to travel with it and the AP on the ARK. But it disappeared one night after receiving a response to its classified ad on these pages.

If anyone spots the aardvark, please contact the AP as soon as possible.

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Dear Editor,

CONGRATULATIONS! Your Summer 1992 double issue (31-32) surprised me very much. Primarily because I'd just been telling my friends and co-workers that because I had not seen an issue from you all in so long, I had declared you all deceased. Boy, am I glad that I was wrong.

It just didn't seem the same believing that I had received my last issue with the first double (29-30).

Let me just say that I love your magazine! My appreciation and gratitude for keeping stable your output of, as far as I'm concerned, high quality science fiction short stories, is beyond my capacity to fully express in words or in person.

So, with that said, I'm going to put my money where my mouth is. Enclosed you will find a money order for \$50.

Remember ladies and gentlemen of *Aboriginal Science Fiction* that your work and efforts are appreciated and warmly anticipated with each issue. The writers also deserve a big hand of applause for their efforts and contributions to the magazine. The artists also deserve a lot of credit for the great success (success doesn't always equal a numbers game) of *Aboriginal SF*. The black and white format does nothing to deter my praise for the consistent quality that you guys and gals put out.

I just thought you needed to hear a positive response to your decisions that have affected your magazine lately.

Sincerely,

Ryan John Williams
Gaithersburg, MD

Dear Alien Publisher,

Ahh ... at long last it arrived. It had been so long since last I held one. Too long. I fondled it; caressed its slick surface. It took five minutes or longer before I could bring myself to carefully, almost reverently, remove the (biodegradable) plastic covering. Again I fondled and caressed, memorizing every detail of the shiny surface. Afraid to open the cover, afraid not to. Knowing fully in my heart the voracious appetite with which I would consume the contents, I turned the cover page and began ...

Thank you for going to the lengths and efforts you have to continue publishing what I consider to be the highest quality magazine of the genre. To my own chagrin, the reason it had been so long since last I perused your magnificent publication was due to having let my subscription lapse a couple of years ago. It is extremely difficult, as Mr. Ryan alluded to in his editorial, to find *Aboriginal* in book stores. There are fortunately a few, so I have been able to pick up an occasional copy from time to time in my travels.

I know the publishing business is highly competitive, as is every business in today's economy. It is sad that there are those even within this category, which looks to the future for its source material, who are still rooted in the past; those who find it necessary to use unfair tactics to

continue staying "on top".

First diatribe complete, I wish to address the comments of those who wrote in apparent disgust at *Aboriginal's* choice of stories. The major reason for my continued fascination with SF and related literature as I grow into middle age (I'll be forty soon), is that it continues to stretch my imagination and the limits of my mind. Any good SF magazine *should* feel free to print any story or article which does so within the boundaries of well crafted writing and the possibilities of tomorrow; both of which, it would seem, are limitless.

Recently I asked someone to read a story of mine. He reacted by attacking what I had written. His assault was not based on the quality of writing, but rather on the content. It was science fiction. He launched into a diatribe of his own haranguing me with suggestions that I should read more of the classics. O. Henry was mentioned several times. My point is that this man has closed his mind, like many people today, to the idea that anything resembling good literature could possibly come from the pages of any publication termed "Science Fiction". Again, how sad.

So, to those who reacted with disgust at the inclusion of stories in *Aboriginal* which you might not care for, I say, "Open your mind to the possibilities presented on these pages". In his day, Jules Verne was probably considered to be bizarre. Any who seek to control the content of a publication because of a knee-jerk reaction to some of the contents should perhaps look to themselves for what bugs them. I, for one, am always pleased with the contents of *Aboriginal* and would be extremely proud to have my work appear on its pages. I hope one day to write something I feel is worthy to be printed here. To those who cancelled their subscriptions go my heartfelt condolences.

To you, favorite alien publisher, keep up the good work and thank you again for your dedication to excellence in *literature*.

Warmest regards,

Vern Trumbly
Valentine, NE

Dear Alien Publisher and Dedicated Humans,

Times are tough, but your efforts bring enjoyment and imagination into my life. Change what you must. Just keep the wonderful stories and artwork coming!

Many thanks and much luck,
S. M. Elliott
Waukegan, IL

Dear Editor,

Never mind the pretty pictures. Just keep the stories coming. Hope you get enough for salaries.

Love the magazine.
Virginia L. Brown
Thurmont, MD

Dear Editor,

I am irritated by the recent boomerang contributors who criticize *Aboriginal* for publishing pessimistic and negative

stories.

All good literature, including science fiction and horror, explore the dark side of humanity, the tedious monotony of daily living, the suffering and cruelty that fills the world.

Readers who crave only the most superficial and insipid entertainment should stick to reading romance novels or old Reagan speeches. Better yet, consume the ultimate in banality and mediocrity, the TV sitcom. A cute child sits on a couch, makes a few smart remarks to initiate canned laughter, and every problem is solved within the half hour.

I thank you for printing my letter in *Aboriginal* No. 31-32, although my last name was misspelled. It is Walters, not Waters. (*Oops, sorry about the typo, and thanks for the support.* — Ed.)

Timothy M. Walters
Muskegon, OK

Hey guy. *Que passo?*

I got no time for lettahs no mo. Sorry. Mebbe in a cupple yeahs.

But I read my name in the "Boomerangs" section of *Aboriginal* No. 31-32 and had to reply. I mean, let's be real, Chuck ... You let the kid scorch me out.

So, in all fairness, I say to you and to him ...

Thank you, sir — from the bottom of my heart, thank you. That's the first time my writing has inspired a written review, no less a fiery emotional attack on my very character.

Barracks rat? Hmm ... And here I thought I was a thirty-year-old civilian electrical engineer who just happened to be married to an intelligence officer ... Ah, well, guess ya learn something every day.

One quick remark about art. In my letter, I said "passion and energy" not T & A. And as far as idealizing the human form goes, look at Michelangelo's David. Tell me Joe couch potato looks like that. (I think TCR might stand for "too concerned with reality".) Wouldn't TV and movies be more enjoyable without "phonies" like Richard Gere and Michelle Pfeiffer? Bring on the common folk.

Fact is, though, in 1983 I was a barracks rat, a fiercely proud one, too, a mechanized infantryman stationed in Eriangen, Germany with the now defunct 1-46th. Don't underrate barracks-rat-dom, pal: I came out of it with a really nice stereo instead of a damaged liver and blank spots in the old memory bank.

Rather than shuck my crew cut around the Marktplatz in green lederhosen (sporting a healthy crop of zits, a G-shock diver's watch, and a hard-on), I read — a lot. Even some stuff outta *Stars and Stripes*. Those piddling little bookstores are holy places to me, oases of culture in a desert of discos and assholes.

Incidentally, I also found time to hit every tourist sight in Europe. Let me recommend a book for you — *Holidays in Hell* by P.J. O'Rourke. For those who've actually travelled the continent, it is a delight.

Thanks, Mr. Ryan. Best to you and your crew. You are life forms comparable to dolphins.

Chip III
Laurel, MD

Dear *Aboriginal*,

I wish to thank you all for a wonderful magazine. I also want to thank you for the very nice hand-written note I received about my subscription and the, as you put it, woes of publishing a Si Fi magazine in today's economy.

And yes, I did receive my special double issue. As of yet, I have not sat down to read it. I am waiting for a special night when the kids are asleep and I sit down and curl up in a blanket and delve into my special issue. Because when I start to read *Aboriginal*, I have a very hard time to put it down. Yours is the first magazine that I ever sat down and read from cover to cover. And I still do it with every issue that I receive. I can't thank you enough for publishing such a wonderful magazine, even with all the problems.

May God bless you all.

A devoted fan,
Lorie Anderson
Cuyahoga Falls, OH

Dear Charlie,

Congratulations on getting the non-profit status you wanted. I'm amazed you managed to keep things going for as long as you did without it. I am especially happy to see the December issue, not only because I got my Larry Blamire fix, but also because the ad for my book (*Shade*) is on the back cover (I was getting *nervous* there).

Aboriginal SF is directly responsible for getting me started in this biz, and I'm glad it's going to be around for a while.

There were so many good stories in the double issue, it's hard for me to choose a favorite, but I think "One Star" by Ray Vukcevich probably fits the bill. I'd love to see a novel by Mr. Vukcevich. I loved "... But Fear Itself," too, and if I keep going I'm going to end up naming just about every other piece in the December issue. (Like "The Larkie" by Phillip C. Jennings!) Good stuff.

Keep slugging, fellow Aborigines,
Emily Devenport
Phoenix, AZ

Dear Editor,

In late October I received a most unusual letter sent all the way from Omsk, Russia! A gentleman, a science fiction fan, wrote that he was interested in exchanging Russian written fan fiction for American written fan fiction.

His letter follows:

"Dear Sheila,

"We are the fans from Omsk, Russia. We have found your address and decided to write you. We want to know about your literary activity and about fan-movement in your country.

"Unfortunately, your literary workshop is not known in Russia. So, we'll be thanking you if you send us one of your books (or something more).

"Besides this we have one business offer to you: to give (or to sell) us a right for translating and publishing your SF stories

on Russia in our country. We want to hear your offer about this.

"We'll be happy to receive letter from you about your work. Moreover, we have some young writers and artists. If you can helping them to show or sell their work in your country, message to us about this, please.

"Our best wishes to you.

"Fan Club, Igor Harenko

"P.O. Box 4118, Omsk, 644089, Russia"

Yours,
Sheila Griffin
Wilton, ME

Dear Mr. Ryan,

Reference the "Guns or Butter" letters in the December 1991 issue. With regards to the issue of "guarantee" in the Bill of Rights, Article Two: people are misinterpreting this article. Badly.

They forgot the times when the Bill of Rights were written. Let me remind them of a few points:

a. We had just fought a revolution against the British and won! The militia had rifles, muskets. Any Revolutionary War museum has these on display.

b. Most citizens owned rifles (not handguns) for the provision of food. They were mostly farmers.

c. The North American continent was still mostly a frontier! Pioneers heading westward pushed into this frontier with rifles to hunt with, defend against attack from Indians, or the French, or the Mexicans, etc.

Therefore, when the Bill of Rights was being written and signed into law, the average citizen had a need and use for rifles — it was their survival during those times into the late 19th Century.

But today we don't need rifles, handguns, etc., for the reasons that they were needed then are no longer valid today: there is no frontier; there are no pioneers or frontiersmen; there are few farmers; hunting is not necessary for survival; and we have regular armed forces that the colonists did not have, etc.

I wanted to write, although late, because I tire of too many slapping Gun Control Advocates in the face with the Bill of Rights. It does *not* guarantee every citizen the *right to own guns!* I am sure the originators could not foresee the changes in demography that would take place 150 years later or they would have certainly written the Second Amendment to reflect this.

Galactically,
Chet Twarog
Mount Home AFB, ID

(Oh, oh. Here we go again. My position is that very little in life is pure black or white, right or wrong. There are too many gradients and gray areas. The Constitution should be treated very delicately. It's lasted over 200 years, and I'd like to see it go for another 200. Guns are a problem. But I have a feeling if I had lived in the riot-torn part of LA in the wake of the Rodney King verdict, I might have slept a little more comfortably with a weapon of some sort under the pillow, hoping to God I'd never, ever, have to use it. If you recall, the police pulled out for fear of inciting the riot to even greater violence. And the National Guard

didn't get called in for several days. As much violence was directed at blacks as any other group. Guns are neither the answer, nor the problem. People are both. The problem is that too often, they are more the latter than the former. The guns causing the most problems are in criminal hands. They will not be turned in even if the right to carry one is removed from the Constitution. There has to be a better answer, and a better way to protect innocent people. But to find it, we've got to get past the blind-faith positions of the opposing sides. In true science, which is the basis for science fiction, you look for evidence and make a theory from the facts. You do not start out with a conviction and select the facts that fit it. That leads to groups like the Flat Earth Society, or a Luddite approach to reality, making "reality" a fiction. — Ed.)

Dear Mr. Ryan,

Enclosed is a donation for the Second Renaissance Foundation.

I am amazed that you were surprised by the "anger and threats" you received in response to the Alien Publisher's "Guns or Butter" piece. The debate over gun control has raged for decades, regularly fueled by liberal doses of fear. Those who advocate stricter gun controls fear the rising crime rates, certain that the increasing violence is destroying the fabric of our society. Those who believe the citizen's right to keep and bear arms is absolute fear that compromising on gun control will eventually result in the erosion of *all* civil rights guaranteed by the Bill of Rights. Capping it all is a gnawing fear shared by both sides, the fear that Congress will be goaded into "rash action" by a "misinformed" public panicked by the distortions, misinformation, and half-truths spread by "the other side." Given that history, how could anyone — other than the Alien Publisher, that is, — have been surprised by the response "Guns or Butter" generated?

No reasonable person would deny the Alien Publisher its "... right to express itself humorously — or otherwise." However, its *ability* to express itself humorously is something else. Ability isn't granted by the reader (or the Constitution), it is granted by God or genetics or whatever. The reader merely appreciates the ability when he finds it. Unfortunately I do not find it in the Alien Publisher's musings. They are always thought-provoking and occasionally offensive, but never funny. Sorry.

A long time fan of Heinlein's *The Man Who Sold the Moon*, it is only natural that I find your idea about a space-borne version of the British East India Tea Company attractive. I seriously doubt that any qualified American will step forward to found such a venture, but if one does, let me know and I'll invest. As a dividend, I'll settle for a successful program. (Now that's the way to disagree without being disagreeable. As for the humor, like beauty, it is most often in the eye of the beholder. — Ed.)

Thanks for your time,
James C. Douglass
Boulder City, NV

□

Set a Place for Arthur

By Steven M. Ford

Art by Lori Deitrick

Marilyn's breath stirred the acrid dust and she fought back the beginning tickle of a sneeze. She balanced precariously on the kitchen chair, one aching leg on the chair back, the other on the seat. She shifted her grip on the center cabinet frame and brought her hand up to her nose, pinching it several times. She sniffed and, for the umpteenth time in the past few minutes, her doctor's voice droned again in her head. *"Damn it, be careful. Your bones might as well belong to a ninety-year-old. And remember, no stress. The radiation ... the chemo ... none of it will work without your cooperation."*

Yeah, yeah, yeah

She had seen something a moment ago while handing the meat platter down to her daughter, Mitzy. Two marks, two grimy smears on the shelf's dusty surface. She had to see them again.

There was a pressure against the chair and it began to wobble. Her breath caught in her throat.

"Mom, can I have —"

"Be careful, Franky, don't knock my legs." Her voice was deep and ghostlike in the hollow space.

She spotted them. They were hard to see. Two smudges hidden between the dirty vases and teak-wood salad bowl. She pushed higher on her toes and sent the kitchen chair into another series of wobbly oscillations.

"But, Mom —"

"Hush, honey, I'm busy." She'd found fingerprints up there that weren't hers.

Arthur's?

"Ma-om, Franky is in the chips."

"All right. All right. Franky, out of the chips." Marilyn sighed and let her gaze linger on the prints.

They must be Arthur's.

She squeezed her eyes shut and fought the ache. She was not going to grieve in front of the children; besides, there was no need. She sagged against the cabinet. The chair shifted, making a soft scraping sound on the tile floor. Her other hand flew up to the cabinet.

"Mitzy!"

The chair began to move, sliding backwards in a series of short slips.

"Mitzy, help me!"

The length of each slip increased from an inch, to two inches, to four inches. The scraping sound grew to a scream.

"Mitzy!"

The chair stopped and Marilyn exhaled a loud tense breath. Her heart pounded. The kitchen spun sickeningly around her.

Shit.

"Mom, you look funny."

Marilyn raised an eyebrow and gave her daughter a sideways glance down through her outstretched arms. Mitzy giggled and Marilyn raised her gaze up to the ceiling and shook her head. She stepped down, being careful not to disturb the prints in the dust.

A loud crunch and several noisy nibbles came from the direction of the pantry. She shot a glance at the open door. "Franky, no chips!"

He stood there with his arm deep into a bag of barbecued potato chips. "But —"

"Franky!"

Hands on hips, she scowled at the squirmy eight-year-old. He sheepishly put the bag back and walked over to stand next to his sister. Marilyn held back a smile. He was her third child and you'd think that nothing could surprise her, but somehow that little squirt was ingenious at getting into everything.

Mitzy towered above him — tall, just like her brother Arthur, had been. She'd recently brought home her eighth-grade class pictures and Marilyn had known just where to look, in the back. The poor girl was at least a head taller than her classmates.

"Who is going to set the table?"

"Mitzy will." Franky gave his sister a shove and darted behind Marilyn's skirt.

"Shut up. I will not. And please, from now on my name is Misty." She squared her shoulders and planted her hands on her hips.

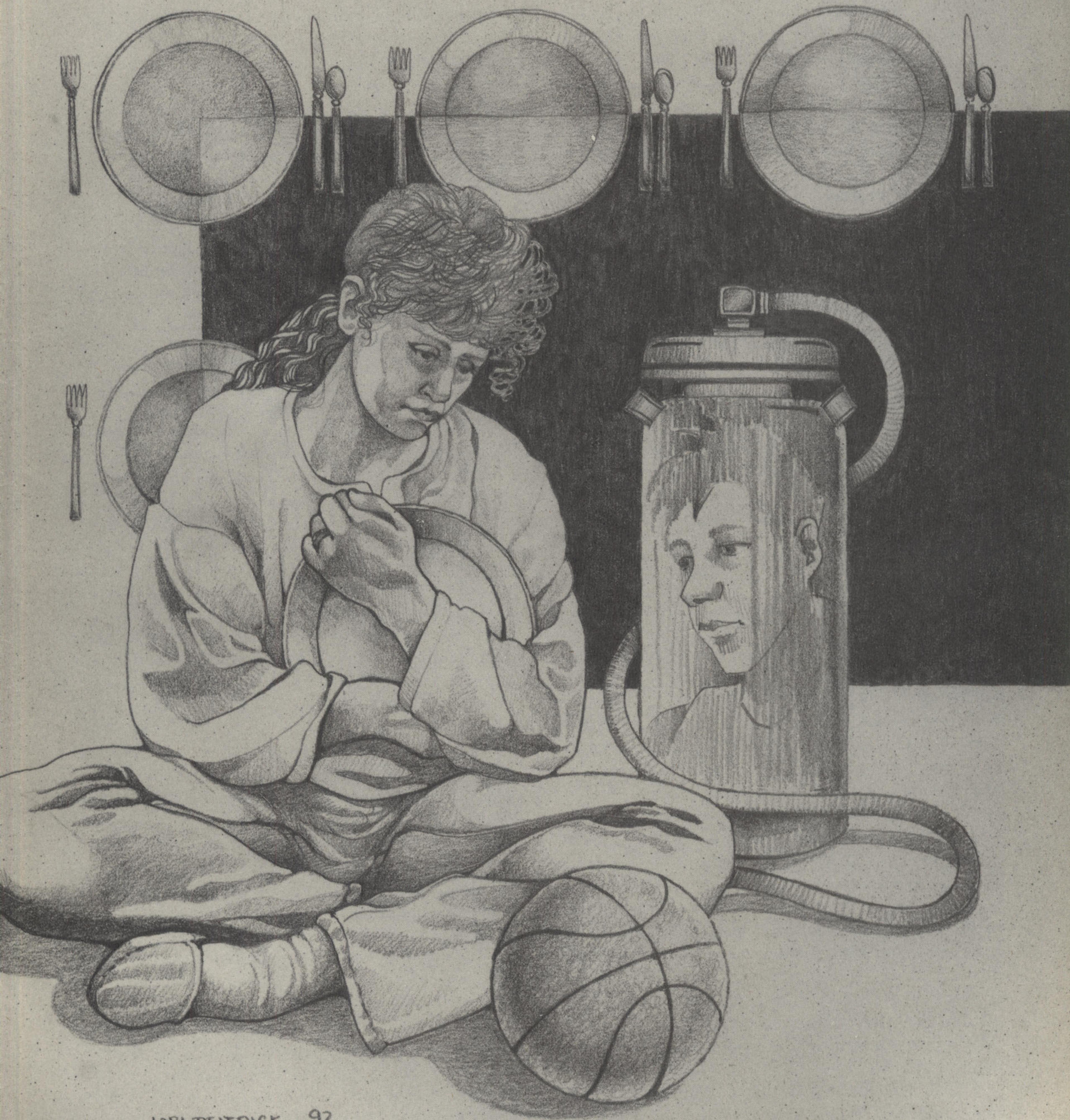
"Ma-om, Mitzy changed her name. She can't do that. Can she?"

Marilyn reached down and brushed potato chip crumbs from the side of his mouth. "It seems to me that since it's her name she can do whatever she wants with it."

She glanced at the hammered copper clock that hung above the kitchen sink. *Five-fifteen. He should be on his way home now.* She turned to the oven and peeked inside; the roast was almost done. The meaty smell invaded her nose and she swallowed hard, fighting off the urge to be sick.

Franky tugged on her skirt. "I want to change my

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LORI DEITRICK...92

name, too."

His squeaky voice distracted her from her queasiness, making her smile for a moment, until she remembered. Her smile faded. Arthur's voice had once been squeaky, before it had begun to change. She recalled the pride, and the fear, she had felt when she realized that her little boy was gone. His voice had become a confused mixture of soprano and baritone, little boy and young man. She tried to imagine him with the deep bass of a man, tried to hear the words, *I love you, Mom*, but they wouldn't come.

"Mommy, Franky just wants to change his name because he's a copy-cat."

"I am not. I'm changing my name because it's mine and I can do whatever I want with it. Mom says."

"Okay, what are you going to call yourself? Spot? I know, how about Rover or Fido? Yeah, that's it — Fido."

"Ma-om!"

"Okay, everyone, quiet." Marilyn massaged the back of her neck. Arthur would have led his little brother and sister around the room like the Pied Piper, their eyes glowing with awe and delight as they did his bidding.

Hands on hips, she again assumed the official mother stance.

"Franky, silverware. Mitzy —"

Mitzy huffed.

"Excuse me. *Misty* ... since you're the tallest you can get the plates."

"How come I have to get the plates? Can't we get Fido a ladder?"

"Ma-om."

She squeezed her eyes shut and resisted the temptation to lie down. "Mitzy, your brother's name is Franky until he decides on a name he likes."

Someone had once asked her why she had had her children five years apart and she'd given them some smart-assed answer like, it seemed like a good idea at the time. *God, what a fool I was.*

"Mom, it's *Misty*."

"Okay, *Misty*, why don't I see any plates on the table? We *do* want Arthur to feel at home when he gets here, and that means we eat our dinner off plates."

Franky giggled. "Mom, that's dumb. Who wouldn't eat their dinner off plates?"

Mitzy began pulling plates off the shelf. "Babies don't use plates."

The chatter faded to a buzz as Marilyn watched her daughter. *She's strong enough and definitely mature enough. A thousand years ago girls her age were already ...* She stopped the thought, embarrassed that she'd let it surface.

Franky tugged at her skirt. "That doesn't count. Does it, Mom?"

"What, Franky?"

"Babies, Mom!"

The confusion on her face must have shown because he shrugged and walked away. There was a sharp stabbing pain in her lower abdomen. She fought valiantly to keep from doubling over, holding her face rigid, hiding the pain from the children. They were not to know about her yet. It was just too much after what had happened to Arthur.

She pushed away the thought of another pain pill. Not yet. She wanted to be alert when Arthur and his father got home.

Mitzy stopped in front of her with several dinner plates weighing down her hands. "Mom, I was just thinking, Arthur isn't going to eat off a plate, is he?"

She sighed. "No, he's not, but I still want you to set a place for him. We want to do as much as we can to make him feel at home."

"Mom?"

"What, Franky?" Marilyn followed them into the dining room.

"Will Arthur be able to talk to us?"

"No, dear, he won't. At least not with words. Perhaps he'll talk to you in your head."

Franky scrunched up his face. "Will he be able to see us?"

"I don't know, honey. I'd like to think he will."

Marilyn watched as Mitzy finished setting out the last plate. Then Franky began his task with a quick toss of silverware onto the table. "Franky, you know better. The fork goes on the left side."

He turned back to her with a feigned wide-eyed look of innocence on his face that quickly melted into a frown. "Oh, all right." He fixed the arrangement and looked around the room. "When is Dad coming home? I'm hungry."

Marilyn wasn't hungry at all. A year ago the smells from the kitchen would have had her in there stirring and sampling, but now, because of the therapy

She forced herself to swallow the bitter saliva that had pooled in her mouth. "Your father should be home from the hospital any time now. He had to sign some papers before they'd let him take Arthur, so he could be a little late."

Mitzy pulled out the chair in her spot, at the far corner of the table, and dropped onto it. Head down, she stared at her plate, twirling a fork in her hand.

Marilyn followed the graceful fall of her daughter's long brown hair. The little-girl curls were gone. *You're going to have to become a woman so soon, but the family will need you after I'm gone.* Marilyn knew that Mitzy could be good with children — even Franky — when she had to.

She looked over at the empty seat to Mitzy's right and there was another pain, not a pain from the cancer, but a pain from emptiness. Arthur had always sat in that chair, a calming force between his

brother and sister. She stared at his seat. She could almost hear the back door slam and the basketball bouncing on the kitchen floor, as he came in from the yard. The next sound would have been that of the refrigerator being opened as he searched for food even on his way to the dinner table.

Franky continued around the table, setting out the knives and forks. "Mom, Arthur always liked roasts didn't he?"

Marilyn nodded. "It was his favorite."

"But, if he can't eat, why do we —" His face suddenly twisted in panic. "Mom, Mitzy is crying!"

"Mitzy, what's wrong?"

She sniffed. "I miss him."

Marilyn walked over and squeezed her daughter's shoulders. "I know, honey, I miss him too."

Mitzy turned and looked up to her with red-ringed eyes. "But why? You said he's not gone and that there's no reason to miss him."

She sighed. "He's not, honey, and soon we'll have him with us always."

"But it won't be the same, will it?"

"What do you mean, dear?"

"He won't be able to take me to soccer practice or take Franky and me to get ice creams. Will he?"

Marilyn shook her head and forced a smile. "No he won't be able to do that, but he will be with us and that's the important —"

The twin beams of headlights suddenly lit up the curtains that covered the dining room window. There was the familiar sound of an engine at fast idle out in front.

"Oh, it's your father. Quick, everyone, see to it that your clothes are straight. Mitzy, use that napkin to wipe your eyes."

"Sniff ... it's Misty, Mom."

Marilyn smiled. *You're a good girl, Daughter. You've got a woman's strength and resilience. And I know you'll do anything for Arthur.* "All right, Misty, stay here with your brother, and I want both of you to look happy when we bring Arthur into the room."

Her heart was beating hard again and she thought of trying to control it. *Oh, the hell with it.*

Marilyn walked quickly through the living room to the entry hall, stopping at the front door. She smoothed down her skirt and picked off small flecks of lint. As she straightened her blouse her gaze rested a moment on the family photograph that hung near the stairway. She sought out Arthur, but as soon as she found him she turned away. His eyes. It was as if he knew her plans for his sister.

She fussed with her hair and fought the urge to turn back and look at the children. To look back at Mitzy.

Open it.

She took a deep breath and grabbed the knob,

turning it slowly until the door popped open and pressed against her. A cold wind came rushing into the house and she stepped quickly out onto the porch, pulling the door closed behind her. Her skirt snapped in the wind.

Neil was already out of the car and walking up the brick pathway carrying only his briefcase. His expression looked grim and panic immediately began to bubble in her throat. She leaned to look behind him, irrationally wondering if the boy was following him.

She wrung her hands together. "Where is he?"

"Don't worry, he's in the car." The words came out slow, somber.

"How did it go?"

"Oh, all right I guess. They froze four ounces of tissue, way more than we'll ever need. The monthly storage charge shouldn't kill us." He talked to the air, avoiding her glance.

"Neil, he's our son."

"I know, I know. It's just that ... well, it's just that it's not what I thought it would be." He stared at the ground. "I hope we're doing the right thing."

She touched his arm. "Why are you saying that?"

"The things the doctors told us. It just doesn't feel like they said it would." He swept his hand through his hair. It was a habit she'd managed to break him of twenty years ago when they were first married, but for the past year it had been almost stuck there.

She looked away from him back to the car, straining to see in the windows. "We'll get used to it."

"I guess."

She hugged her arms around herself as another gust sent a chill through her body. "The children are waiting and it's cold. Go and get him."

He raised his hand and passed it through his hair

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again. "Okay. But don't be surprised."

"Honey. The doctor told us all about it. What's there to be surprised about? Now go get my son!"

He walked slowly to the car and fumbled with his keys for a moment before going to the back and opening the trunk. Marilyn gasped when she realized that the boy was in the trunk. He fumbled with a large awkward object, which had apparently shifted around because he had to push at it a few times before he was able to seize hold of the handles. The emptiness that had been with her since Arthur's death grew as she watched her husband pull the canister out of the trunk.

What if it's not real? She clamped down on the thought. It was real. She could see the canister right there in her husband's arms.

It was a large cylindrical object about the size and shape of an old fashioned milk bucket. Its cold metal surface glimmered in the wash from the streetlight.

After lugging the canister partway up the walk he stopped and set it down.

She shivered. "Hurry up."

He nodded, picked it up, and continued on. She held the door for him.

Once inside he set it down in the hall and wiped his arm across his forehead. "It's the batteries. The guy at the hospital told me that in five years, when it's time to replace 'em, the state-of-the-art will be a containment vessel a quarter this size and light as a feather." He shifted it around a little. Its chrome surface reflected the distorted images of the room and them. "Until then I've got to get a hand truck or maybe I can put some wheels on it."

She looked over to the dining room, where the children stood at attention. Mitzy's face was a mixture of fear and anticipation. Marilyn nodded. Mitzy had matured early; her body would be strong enough. "Let's hope that we never have to get new batteries," she whispered.

He looked away from his wife and down to the floor. "Honey, I think we should talk about this again."

No!

She fought down another wave of nausea and looked up at her husband. "We've already talked about it. Mitzy will be fourteen in a few months — that's plenty old enough. Besides Congress is getting ready to pass a law ..." There was an edge of desperation in her voice.

"That law only applies to children sixteen and up."

"I know. So we'll have to do it soon, while we can find a doctor still willing. She'll understand."

"It just doesn't feel right. It should be her choice."

The air in the hall began to feel hot, stuffy. "She's just a child. How can she have a choice? We're her parents — only *we* know what's best for her. Besides, I don't have time for her to choose."

He looked up and glanced into the dining room. She couldn't read his face. Was he going to back out? Then her son would be trapped.

She watched him open his mouth to speak and she quickly cut in. "Let's take Arthur to the children."

He sighed and nodded. She tried to help him pick the canister up, but it was just too heavy, so he carried it himself into the dining room. The children stepped back as they entered. Neil set it down in the center chair.

Franky walked up to Neil. "Daddy, that looks heavy. I thought a person's soul was supposed to be invisible and light?"

He smiled down at his son and tousled his hair. "I imagine it is, son, but it takes a lot of electronic gadgets to keep a soul inside this thing."

"Why, Daddy? Doesn't a soul want to be there? What happens if it wants to go to Heaven?"

He grimaced. "Don't worry, son, I talked to Arthur before he di ... went to sleep, and he told me that he wanted to be with us."

"And besides," added Marilyn as she stared hard at her daughter. "Most souls just want to go into a baby so that they can run and jump and play and be a person again."

Mitzy stood near the canister with a fearful look on her face. She reached out a careful hand and touched its smooth chrome surface. She looked up to her father. "Dad, I don't feel so good. My stomach hurts. Can I be excused from dinner?"

Marilyn watched her husband stare long and hard at their daughter. Her unease grew with each second of that eye contact. "Nonsense, *Misty*, you're just hungry. Sit down and I'll set out dinner."

"Mom, you can call me Mitzy. And I'm not hungry. I feel sick."

Marilyn opened her mouth, but before she could say anything Neil spoke up. "That's okay, honey, you're excused."

She turned and began to walk out of the dining room.

Marilyn shot a fiery look at her husband. "Mitzy!"

"Yes, Mom?"

"You haven't said hello to your brother."

"Dear!"

Marilyn looked around. Everyone was staring at her. Her legs were weak, her stomach was agony, she felt alone. Like Arthur. "Arthur is here, and he is still a part of our family." She turned to her daughter. "Mitzy!"

Mitzy face had gone pale. "Welcome home, Arthur," she whispered, and spun around and fled up the stairs.

"Dad, can I be excused, too?"

Neil glanced at her. She remained silent. "Okay, son, go on up with your sister. I'll bring a snack up for both of you later."

Franky looked over to his mom and walked over to Arthur's chair. "Hi, Arthur. Don't worry, I'll think of some way that we can play together." He looked up and beamed a smile at his parents. Then he, too, ran up the stairs.

Marilyn walked over to her chair and sat down, wishing she could hide from her husband's wide-eyed open-mouthed stare. She stared at the table top and spoke softly, her voice almost a whisper. "It'll take them at least a month to produce a viable clone. She'll only be away from her friends for five or six months once she begins to show." She remembered the look on her daughter's face as she watched them bring Arthur in. Mitzy knew. Marilyn remembered the ripping pain of childbirth. Each child had torn something away from her until she could have no more. A tear fell from her eye. Her daughter was so young.

She felt her husband's hands on her shoulders and tried to pull away. "We have a duty to our children," she said as she felt a rush of blood to her face. Fear tore through her. She was going to lose

Arthur again.

"Honey," he said, "we have a duty to *all* our children."

She tried to remember herself at Mitzy's age. Her life had been consumed with thoughts of boys, not a newborn baby and a dying mother.

Marilyn squeezed her eyes shut and leaned back against his hands. They kneaded her shoulders. She stood up and turned, putting her arms around her husband and pulling him tight against her. She buried her face into his chest. He stroked the back of her hair.

"When Mitzy's older ... then she can decide. Or maybe the law will change and we can hire a surrogate." His chest hummed with the vibration of his voice.

She pulled him tighter and said goodbye to the sound of the basketball that she'd never hear again. She knew she wouldn't be around the next time Arthur breathed air.

She hugged her husband a little while longer before going into the kitchen to get dinner. □

A Long Time Ago

Before taking charge at *Aboriginal Science Fiction*, our editor, Charles C. Ryan, was the editor of *Galileo*, a science fiction magazine published in the mid-1970s. During his tenure there, he helped discover a number of new writers who have since gone on to win Nebula and/or Hugo awards, such as Connie Willis, John Kessel, Lewis Shiner, and more.

For a limited time, while copies last, you can purchase a first-edition hardcover copy of *Starry Messenger: The Best of Galileo* for \$10, plus \$2 postage and handling. (Please allow 6-8 weeks for delivery.) If you would like your copy autographed by the editor, please indicate how you would like the note to read.

Starry Messenger: The Best of Galileo (St. Martin's Press, 1979) features 12 stories by the following authors:

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Spin

By K.D. Wentworth

Art by N. Taylor Blanchard

The line between pleasure and pain don't exist. They're just two sides of the same thing, but you can bet your tommywobbles I never learned that from my old man. For fourteen years, his message for me was that pain is all there is, and them that dishes it out, rules the world. But I'm here to tell you, compadre, it ain't necessarily so, not if you know the right way to tickle your receptors.

The night I found that out, I was just hanging out down on Wheeler Greenbelt, swatting at the fierce black bugs that stung and buzzed and almost blotted out the racket from the third rate feelie-joint down on the corner. The right side of my face throbbed like I'd run up against one of the joe-squads' mega-class stunners. Nerve damage, the Med had said the one time I'd bothered to go in for treatment. Like a lot of things, it could be fixed — for a price. My fault, of course, for standing in the way of my old man's fist one too many times.

I caught a glimpse of myself in the window as I passed José's All-night Memory Shop, all bruised-up from another round with the old man's knuckles. Then I heard the pop of go-belts overhead and looked up as a string of flyers skimmed my nose by less than a milli, the hot stink of belt-trail strung out behind them and every one dirty as hell. The joe-squad tailing them sputtered way off to the right though, probably keying on some prime dude's limo in need of a tune-up.

One of the beltlers peeled off and pop-popped to a stop, landing just in front of one of them big government-protected oak trees. "Holà, soldado." Walking toward me, she ran her fingers through her long dark-brown hair, making it crackle with static electricity. "So which way you spinnin' these days?"

I didn't want to talk to nobody, but, in spite of myself, I was interested. Miguel, my man, I told myself, she's, like, smooth in all the best places. Then I remembered my beat-up face and backed into the shadows. "Ain't spinnin' a t'all, if you really want to know."

She let loose with a laugh and crossed into the light. I saw for sure she didn't have one of them rubbery-looking safe-suits on and my assessment of her guts rose another three notches. Takes a hell of a lot of nerve to ride one of them unshielded go-belts, knowing as how you're frying your insides at the same time.

The black snakecloth hugging her curves

shivered and crawled under the harsh pink-and-green lights. "So what happened to you?"

Real quick, I shoved my cut hands into my pockets. "Life."

"Yeah, life." She laughed low and husky. "Better watch that, soldado. It'll kill you."

Caught by surprise, I started to laugh too, then sucked in a shocked breath when I moved my busted lip.

Hurts?" Extending a broken-nailed finger, she traced the swollen outline of the red-purple welt around my eye. "There's a cure for that, you know."

So like everyone else in the barrio, she was peddling. "I ain't got no plastic."

In the darkness, her eyes glowed with a faint blueness that had nothing to do with the ugly holos overhead. She was definitely on something. "Hey, plastic is easy," she said. "It's living that's hard."

"Yeah." I turned my head and watched through the window as the old man's gnarled fingers sorted through the returned memory chips. "I guess anyone can do plastic."

"Damn right." She pulled a vial of something from inside her shimmering black jacket and held it up. "Ever tried Zip?"

The vial contained an oily liquid that coated the sides, shining pale-pink and green under José's sign. My eyes flicked from her hand back to the old man, who glanced up to scowl at me through the window. *Come in or beat it*, his lined face said, *beat it before I call the joes*.

I edged deeper into the shadows where maybe the old sodder couldn't see me. "That stuff real?"

"Real enough." She turned the vial upside down so that the contents oozed lazily to the other end. "This culture's good for three years, maybe even four, if you stay away from milk and the joes don't get you." She cocked her head at me. "Interested?"

My throat went dirt-dry. I pressed my head back against the weather-pitted brick, trying to read her face. "So, how do I know it's real?"

Smiling, she slipped a knife out of her sleeve and, with one fluid motion, laid the palm of her hand open like it was an act of love. Her head arched back



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as the dark blood welled up, then dripped wetly to the dirt-encrusted sidewalk.

A hot surf beat in my temples. "How much?" I asked hoarsely.

Her eyes flicked toward the memory shop. "Whatever the old fizzer's got."

I moved closer to the window. Inside, José was counting the day's creds, stringing them out on the counter in ragged rows of blue and red and yellow. The sentimental Anglo memories like birthday parties and Fourth of July picnics he stocked were real popular down here, and it seemed to have been a good night. For a moment, my mind drifted as I tried to remember how long it had been since there'd been plastic in our digs for anything but a minimum amount of food and my old man's vino.

Her hand slipped up to my throbbing cheek. "I'll juice you up before."

I knew all about Zip, of course, knew what a dose of the crazy little symbiotes can do for your metabolism, and I gave it careful consideration . . . never to feel anything but pleasure from my old man's fist, no matter how hard he busted me from now on . . . the idea pulsed, you know, like — knocked me flat as ground zero.

"Here." She pushed the cool plas vial into my hand, smearing me with her bloodied palm. "Do the old geezer, and then we'll celebrate."

I started to break the safety-foam seal, then hesitated. I mean, there I was, barely hatched as far as the world was concerned, and I have to admit that images of detox wards and damaged neurons flickered through my head.

"Ah, pobrecito." Her eyes, dark as a well at midnight, mocked me. "Don't tell me. You're one of those that actually likes pain?"

I popped the white seal, then watched it fall to the cracked sidewalk and roll up against my boot. I was tired of hurting, tired of living like that, hell, just tired, ready for a change, a chance, a way out, just something *else*. I took a deep breath and smelled crushed geraniums mixed with petroleum.

Throwing my head back, I poured the thick liquid on my tongue, and let the bitter taste drip down my throat.

"That's it." Her voice was a hazy murmur. "Give it a minute."

I shuddered as the shop lights phased suddenly from pink-and-green to purple —

— red —

— blue —

"Hold on, soldado." She nodded in time to the changes.

— orange —

— green —

Then finally, almost leisurely, the light returned to the sign's lurid pink-and-green. And now my blood was whispering to me, singing, like it knew

what was going on.

Her fingers stroked my bruised eye. "See?"

At her touch, pleasure exploded in the side of my face, a warm shivery rush that ran all the way down into my toes. I drew a shaky breath.

"You don't ever have to hurt again." She nuzzled my welts with the tip of her nose. "Now go on in there and take what you want like one of us, like a real ElekTron."

My eye and cheek were aglow, as though I'd just had a long soaking session in a Class-A fresher, feeling, like, awake, you know, for the very first time. I wanted to laugh.

Banging back the door, I strolled into the shop. The old man glanced up, scowling. "About time. I thought you was going to stand out there and smack face with that broad all night." His fingers drummed on the worn plas counter. "What'll it be?"

All I had was my bare hands, and he likely had a stunner under the counter, and perhaps even something a shade more on the lethal side. But the Zip humming through my veins was better than six centims of full body armor. The old geezer might kill me, but he sure as hell couldn't hurt me.

"Hand over the plastic." I held out my hand, still streaked red with her blood. "Now."

"Yeah, yeah." José eyed me wearily. "Tell me another one."

"You heard me." I put a hand to my bruised cheek and shuddered at the warm burst of pleasure. "Hand it over!"

"Sure thing." Looking mildly pissed, he held his left hand up while he shoved some reds my way.

I scooped up a handful of the little squares. "Now the rest!"

He pushed the blues across the counter, then dropped his right hand to whip out an ancient stunner and let rip with a blast. The ray caught me full on the left side, but as my arm and hand stiffened, the pain-turned-to-pleasure burned all the way through me, zigging and zagging. I laughed, then jumped on the counter and kicked his ass to the back wall. "Rent that, you old fart!"

His head struck the wall hard, then he sagged to the floor with a curiously surprised look on his wrinkled face. Jumping down, I stood over him, suddenly sick, as though my stomach was full of those damn black bugs. The belter stuck her dark-haired head into the shop and grinned at me with broken teeth. "Not a bad start." Sauntering in, she peeled the seam on her suit and crammed the creds in next to her breasts.

Half-dazed, I handed her the rest, then followed her outside. "Get yourself some wings, niño." She flipped a few blues back my way. "Then hop on down to the Snake and ask for the ElekTrons." Revving her belt, she headed back for the thick black sky and the unseen stars, leaving me there with my handful

of stolen blues.

When he seen how my arm was still a little stunner-stiffed the next morning, the old man backhanded me a few times, trying to get the wherewithal out of me, but it felt so damned good that I had all I could do not to curl up in a ball and enjoy it.

"Criminal!" he screamed into my face, his breath heavy with stale beer-stink. "What'd you do last night, off some old broad for a few lousy creds?"

Looking at his sweaty face then, I seen how he hated us all — me for being young, Mama for dying, everyone else for going on when he couldn't. Fourteen years was enough; it was time to get out.

"Adios, Papa!" I chucked him under the chin like a baby, then danced out of his reach. "It's been, like, real, you know."

Angrily, he swung at me again, but missed. I laughed and my blood laughed with me. For the first time, it felt good to be alive. Walking out the door, I knew I didn't need him or that dirty old apartment no more. I had my blood now, and my blood had me. We were in, like, partnership and it was more than just enough; it was everything.

Outside, I retrieved the blue creds from their hiding place behind a loose brick, then set out to buy myself a go-belt. Not a new one, of course, that would cost ten times more than I had, but there was enough for a rebuilt one some place where they didn't worry about papers and registration and crap like that.

Everyone in the barrio knew about Pablo Pete, of course. He bought anything that wasn't nailed down, and sold it at outrageous prices. I knew him better than some, though. He was cool for an old guy, and not above letting me hang out from time to time when my old man's fist got too heavy.

"Hey there, Miguel." Pete looked up from the rusty hopper motor he was working over with a knife in front of his shop. "Ain't seen you in a spell." His good eye winked at me while the other just stared, all shiny and metallic. "How's it hangin'?"

"Hangin' fine." I gave him a cool look. "I need a belt, the fastest you got."

"A belt." For a moment, he stared at the knife like he didn't know what it was, then slid it back into his boot. "Now, go-belts, they ain't for anyone who wants niños in his future. You gotta think on that."

"Niños!" I smothered a laugh. "Man, I don't want to procreate, I want to recreate." I'd heard that slogan lots of times from belters and it was like, so true.

He sighed. "Well, I shield 'em as best I can, but Hain't nothin' gonna really protect your cojones from shit that hot, except maybe a really good safe-suit, and I don't expect you're going that road."

Spin

Just then a belter sputtered over us, up there just breezing through the hazy gray sky. I burned to be up there too, riding above all the little things and littler people below, out of reach, you know . . . real.

"You flyin' on Scratch or somethin'?" he asked, then looked me full in the face. "Hell, it's Zip. No mistaking those eyes." He scratched his crooked nose, a reminder of one of the few times someone down here worked up the nerve to go after him. Word was that they looked somewhat on the dead side themselves.

He stood up and brushed his pants off. "I'd try to beat some sense into you, but you'd just enjoy that, wouldn't you, you little shit?" He gestured at me impatiently. "You might as well come on back."

The belts hung there on the wall, just slim black webs fitted with exhaust jets fore and aft, nothing to get excited about, unless you knew what they could do, which was plenty — make eighty clicks from zero in the blink of an eye, take a curve sweet as your mother's milk, and of course, roast your insides to hot ashes if you rode 'em too long.

Pete rubbed his whiskery chin with two fingers. "Blues?"

I flipped him the creds, then moved around the shadowy room, in awe of so much power finally hanging within my reach.

"Who you gonna fly with, boy?"

I glanced at him real sharp-like over my shoulder. He looked disgusted, and on a face as used as his, it was a stomach-curdling sight. "How'm I gonna fit you out proper if you don't tell me?"

I lifted my chin. "ElekTrons."

"Yeah, I might've known." He turned back to the belts. "They're all mighty big on Zip." Handing me down a slender black duraplas web, he nodded. "You tell them compadres of yours that Pete fit you up right."

Snapping the belt around my waist, I adjusted the shoulder and thigh straps and looked impatiently for the controls.

"Here." He triggered the power, sending a faint vibration through the belt, then guided my fingers to the pressure points. "These are real sensitive. Don't overcontrol."

"Yeah, yeah." I shoved him aside, then walked out front and touched the controls. "Hasta mañana, man." The ground fell away from under my feet as the familiar stink of dirty belt-trail fanned out behind me. I was soaring finally, like truly peeling into the gray yonder, and nothing was ever gonna stop me again.

Finding the Snake groundclub from the air was much harder than I'd thought. Along the way, I grazed the commercial lanes a few times, buzzed a gleaming white limo, and even got a warn-off from

a lone joe, but no one actually hassled me. It was great. When I finally spotted what I was looking for, I hit the ground strutting.

Down inside the Snake, it was hot, crowded, and thick with the too-sweet scent of females and belt-trail and smoke.

"So, soldado." From behind, a finger pinched my ear hard, sending a hot spasm of pleasure rippling through my body. "You made it."

I spun around and caught a hand in the smoky dimness, feeling more than seeing it was her again. "Holà," I said, my throat suddenly dry.

Hey, Rosa!" someone called from the back. "You doin' babies now?" Laughter ricocheted through the steamy press of bodies and my face went furnace-hot.

"Don't get excited, Eduardo, 'cause even if I was . . ." She smiled toward the rear of the room, her eyes lazy and heavy-lidded, ". . . I wouldn't do you."

Laughter roared as she put an arm around my shoulder. "Come on," she said into my ear, her breath warm and ticklish. "Julio wants to see you."

Music clanged suddenly, then ascended into thunder, vibrating the walls and the floor and the very air with an earthquake-level beat. All around me, people burst into spin-dance, whirling until they hit someone, then spinning off in the opposite direction. Rosa's nails dug into my arm, sweet as kisses on a summer day, as she towed me along, ducking elbows and pushing back until we stumbled into a trashed-out cubby on the far side of the room.

Breathless, she dumped me in a scratched-up plas chair, then draped herself across the shoulders of a stocky bruiser who looked to have lost at least as many fights as he'd won. The broken white of her teeth flashed suddenly as she nipped his ear. "This is Julio," she shouted over the music as blood trickled lazily down his neck. "He spins the ElekTrons."

Julio would have made two, maybe two and a half of my old man. One ear had been sheared off at the root and a half-healed scar twisted from his nose around up into his hairline. "Rosa says you might know your stuff." The cold steel of his voice carried through the music. "But that's not good enough. You want in, niño, you got to do someone for me, then we'll know if you're good enough to spin with the ElekTrons."

The breath caught in my throat, but I nodded.

"I got a little job that's been on my mind." His thick face twisted into a grimace. "A bleeder that's got way too much lip. No one mouths off to the ElekTrons and gets away with it. That's the first commandment, do you copy?"

"Sure," I said, my voice lost in the music. "Like, everyone knows that."

Julio shoved back from the table, sending it

crashing to the floor.

Rosa nodded at me. "Let's go!"

A handful of dancers peeled away from the crowd and followed as we fought our way back up the stairs. Outside, it was later than I'd thought, the sky darkening to dullness in the east, a nightmare of hazy reds and oranges in the west.

Without another word, Julio thumbed his belt and hit sky, the others only a split-second behind. Worried that I was gonna be left behind, I jammed my fingers into the sensors too hard and soared above Julio's head.

Right away, I could see in their faces that was stupid. They buzzed off without another word, leaving me to follow as best I could. I flashed on that lesson right then and there. Don't never ride above the den mother's head.

In five minutes, they angled down to the ground, hanging a tight curve around an ancient feelie-joint and landing in a familiar back alley filled with shards of old glass and tattered strips of plas. Wary of making another stupid mistake, I touched down nearby.

"Now." Julio's dark eyes were unreadable, every centimeter of his body stiff. "You gonna do this old fizzer or just watch?"

"I didn't come to watch nobody." My fingers danced nervously over the belt.

"See?" Rosa threw her head back, running one hand through that long brown hair. "Let him get on with it." She paced a restless circle. "Like I'm hungry, you know?"

"So who is it?" I watched Julio's face. "Who mouthed you off?"

He grimaced. "An old geezer by the name of Pete, Pablo Pete." His massive hands worked like he was choking the life out of something. "I want him done, and I want him done real slow."

"Pete?" A knot the size of my old man's fist rose up in my throat. "But he's the one who outfitted me."

A crafty smile split Julio's scarred face. "Even better, then. Once you do him, won't nobody know which way you're spinnin' or who with."

Nodding, I shoved my hands into my pockets. No good arguing; when something's gotta be done, you don't think about it. You just do it. The barrio taught me that. I tugged at the back door of Pete's shop, but it was locked.

"Estupido!" Julio's number two boy, who had the build of a sky-train, shoved me aside, then flashed the lock into cinders with his compact laser.

Trying not to shake, I opened the door and slipped into the dark back of Pete's shop. Nothing stirred, even though he was still probably open. Holding my breath, I felt my way through the boxes and barrels, knowing I was making more noise than was smart.

Finally, I rounded an unseen corner and saw a patch of gray up ahead. My heart pounded; I just

wanted to get it over with. You did the old geezer at the memory shop, I told myself, you can do this. But I knew that had been different. Julio didn't look to be the kind satisfied with a few bruises.

"Holà," came a low voice.

Looking around, I didn't see no one, but I snatched up a broken broom from the floor. "Holà, yourself."

"Julio sent you, didn't he?" It was Pete's voice. "You know, that boy has a lot of bad habits. You go back and tell him that I said it's bad business to kill your friends."

"He don't have no friends."

Pete laughed kinda low, his voice tight. "You got that one right."

I tightened my grip on the broom, then flattened myself against the wall. Where in the hell was he? Sliding along the wall, I finally emerged in the light of the storeroom where Pete sat before a small table and a cold meal of tortillas and cheese and a glass of honest-to-god milk.

"So, Miguel . . ." He studied me over his uplifted fork. "You gonna do me before or after I finish?"

My insides were doing a goddamned spin-dance all their own. I tried not to shake. "It's, like — business." I rubbed a hand over my eyes to chase away the image of the old geezer at the memory shop, just lying there bleeding and looking so damned surprised. Then in his place, I saw Pete, the same Pete who used to let a hungry, beat-up barrio-brat hole up at his place without asking no questions.

"Hey, hurry up!" Julio's squat body squeezed around the corner. "You gonna do this old bleeder or hold his hand?"

Yeah, which is it gonna be?" Pete forked up another bite of tortilla. "I mean, I ain't got all night."

My hands twisted on the broom handle.

"Goddammit!" With a sudden flick of his arm, Julio elbowed me into a pile of plas crates, then aimed his pile-driver-hands at Pete's neck.

Even as the impact's pain-turned-to-pleasure flooded through me, I flashed back to my old man's fist coming straight for my face. I suppose it had to figure that things always seemed to end up the same way. Someone was always beating on me and, pain or no, I was getting real done with the whole idea. Struggling against the sweet waves of pleasure, I wavered to my feet. "Leave him alone!"

"Or what?" Julio laughed as his hands closed around Pete's neck. "You're gonna call the joes?"

Pete clawed at his attacker's face, leaving raw seams of blood and flesh behind, but Julio just squeezed harder, sure as taxes and dead-calm. Coming up behind, I opened another bloody gash across his head with the broom handle. Julio laughed

again, his voice a roar, as he forced Pete's writhing body to the floor and kneed the old man in the gut.

In desperation, I hit Julio first with a crate, then the chair Pete had been sitting in. He glanced up at me. "Hey, you're next, niño. Too bad you're still juiced up, though. You'll enjoy it."

Pete was barely moving now, his face red, his good eye bulging, buying the big one right there in front of me without any little symbiotes to ease his way. I looked around for something, anything to do Julio with, but short of killing him, nothing would hurt, and I didn't see anything that could do the job.

Then I copied the table with Pete's dinner, tortillas and cheese and *milk*, real friggin' milk! I snatched the glass up, savoring the coldness of it in my hand. "Here, you half-zigged screw-up!" I shouted. "Do this!"

Drawn by my voice, Julio glanced up, his mouth open to reply. I let fly with the whole glass of cow juice, then watched it dribble down his beefy face in thin white streams. Tossing Pete aside, he spit and spit. I stared at him, fascinated. Had he swallowed enough? And if he had, how long would it take for the milk to trash his cultures? I couldn't remember, probably had never actually heard. Was it a matter of seconds or minutes or hours or days?

Then he lurched for me and I suddenly remembered to move. Scuttling backwards, I slammed hard into the wall, a sensation of pleasure so intense that I knew I must have half-brained myself. Then Julio was on me, his sour breath mixed with the fresh smell of milk, his eyes red and crazed as if he . . . as if he were in . . . pain.

His hands were on my neck, squeezing hard enough to send my body into hot spasms of overwhelming pleasure. I tried to fight, thinking that if I could just hold on, the long-delayed agonies of his abused body might catch up to him, but he used his mass against me, pressing harder and harder, and then I wasn't thinking of nothin' a t'all.

I came to in a Med, lying there in the warm fuzziness of the suspension field and feeling so good that it was a while before I realized that, in addition to tidying up the havoc Julio had wreaked on my anatomy, the Med had gone and offed the symbiotes in my blood.

Goddamned soulless machine — I stared up at the ceiling, a hot knot of anger twisting inside — just when I'd finally gotten a slight edge in the world, it slipped away. If I wanted to fly again, I was gonna have to start all over.

"So?" Pete's raspy voice said. "You still lyin' around here?"

"What the hell do you want?" I glanced over as his used-looking face came into the room. "Come to watch the joes haul my ass away?"

"The joes?" His one good eye blinked, while the mechanical one stared down at me remorselessly. "I never called no joes."

I was silent.

"Goddammit, I don't need no half-zigged joes to take care of my business, and don't you forget it!"

"Yeah, yeah."

"They say they're gonna spring you today." He thrust his hands into his worn pockets.

"Great." I turned my face away. "Probably be payin' this bill the rest of my life."

"Listen, you little shit, you're just damn lucky you even got a life!" His voice crackled with anger. "And you don't owe them a goddamned cred. I took that lousy go-belt back and paid your account with the blues. I had 'em fix everything they could find and you still got some change comin'."

Everything? By moving my hand through the field real slow, I forced it up to my nerve-damaged cheek and — it didn't *hurt*, for first time in years it felt like normal everyday flesh instead of my old man's punching bag.

There's more than one way to spin, you know." Reaching into the Med's field, he pressed a few reds into my hand. "Julio's boys, they're spinnin' one way and they ain't never comin' back." He studied me for a moment, his face a map of weariness. "You

might as well face it, pain is the price of living. Without it, you die real slow, one fizzing piece at a time."

I stared at him.

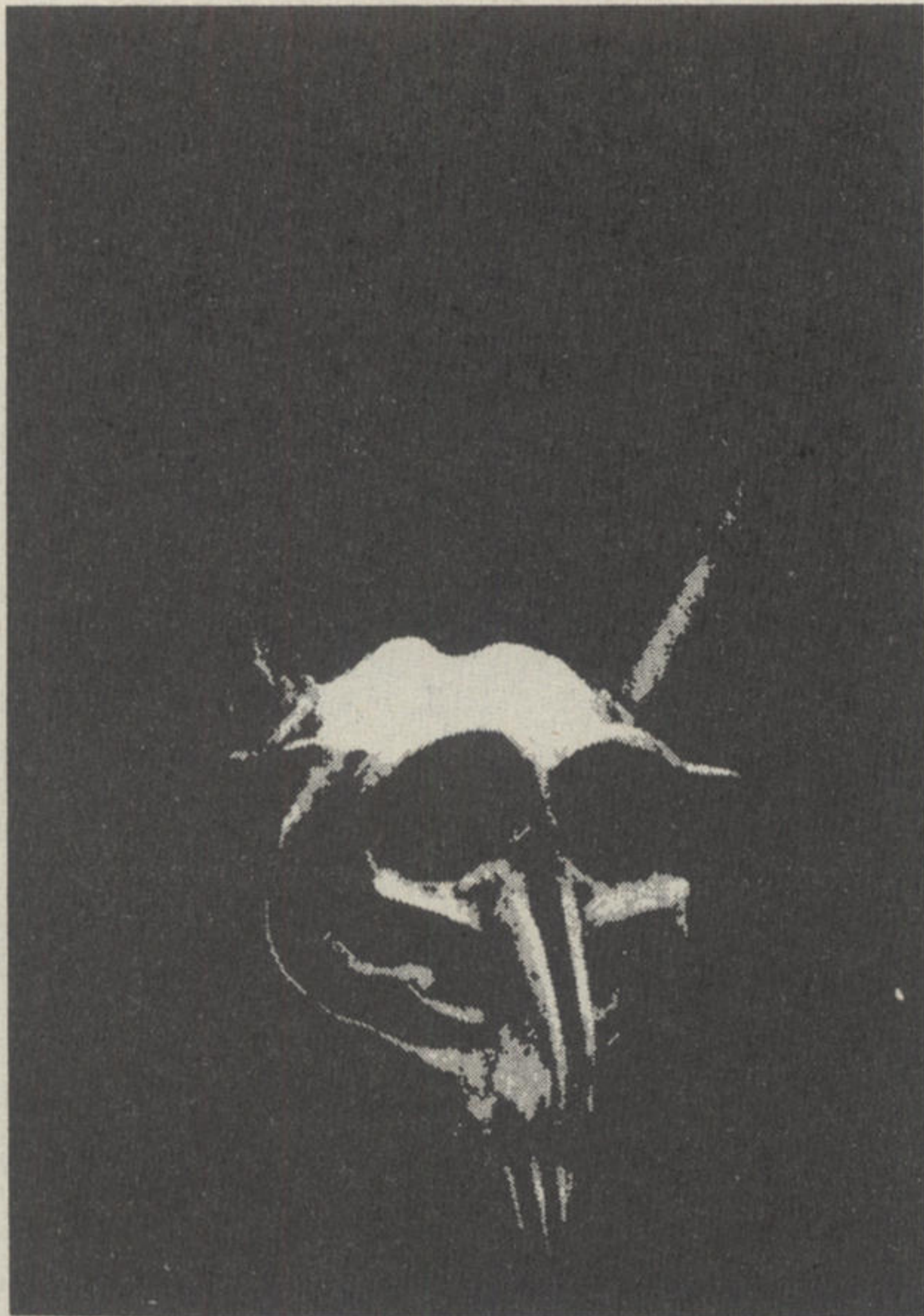
"Think on it," he said, and then he was gone.

So, soldado, here I lie, all tucked up nice and sanitary-like in my own paid-up Med, waiting to get sprung while old Pablo Pete's words rattle around in my head and I try to decide. Is it better to fly hot and fast and dirty-as-hell, burnin' the world up along with your own cojones, or live low and slow, soaking up the pain along with the pleasure like the rest of the mundanes have had to do since the world first took on spin of its own?

I think of my old man and his angry fist and how he never tried nothin' but hate. Hate and hating, I guess those two balance out, each calling the other till there's no room for nothin' else. Maybe if you give up the one though, the other falls behind.

I guess I could try it Pete's way. Hell, if it don't work out, I can always go back to tickling the old receptors. I mean, I think I finally copy the big secret now.

No matter where you are, there's always another way to spin. □



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Succession

By R. Gary Raham

Art by R. Gary Raham

But what makes you think Mr. Wakamura will attempt to kill you today, sir?" Oscar asked.

Dennis Grayson smiled. How do you explain to your Domestic Home Intelligence about a hunch? How do you quantify the experience of a lifetime — a very long lifetime at that — to a pricey assemblage of pseudonerves and polymers? "Take my word for it, Oscar, and feed that revised assassination program into my MBM." Grayson tapped the Medband Body Monitor on his wrist with the manicured nail of his right index finger.

The MBM seemed to chirp merrily as it accepted Oscar's pulsed audio input signal. Grayson watched the dancing numbers that profiled metabolites, hormone levels, cardiac and neural functions. He doublechecked the readouts on his artificial left leg and his reconditioned joints. He scanned the room briefly with his UV and infrared-augmented vision.

"Donald Wakamura just checked in at the front gate, sir," Oscar said. "Shall I direct him to the study?"

"Yes, Oscar, offer him our hospitality. Oh, and change the gallery display on the north wall to the self-portrait series. Give him something to think about."

"Yes, sir."

"I think Don is partial to that Argentinian coffee, too," Grayson added, pulling a speck of lint off his blazer.

"According to my data net, his doctor has advised against coffee. Perhaps a selection of fruit juices?"

"The best we have to offer, Oscar," Grayson sighed. "I want Don's last drink to be memorable."

Wakamura stood at the refreshment bar, sipping orange juice from Grayson's best crystal. Morning light filtered through the orchids by the bay window and cast complex floral shadows on his beige suit and the chocolate-brown briefcase resting on the sofa. He looked up at Grayson and smiled, raising his glass in a mock toast. "Morning, Dennis. It's a great one, isn't it?" He turned and swung his free arm toward the window.

Damn morning person, Grayson thought, as he followed the motion of Wakamura's arm until his eyes were captured by the familiar tangle of light and color. For a moment, he tried to decide what brush he would need to paint the delicate threads of the spider orchids and how to blend colors to capture

the delicate lavender of his *Cattleyas*. He smiled. Old habits die hard. Trying to capture beauty — whether with paint or with pixels — was an affectation of his youth. "Better than average, Don," he said to Wakamura. "I'll admit to that."

"Sorry I'm not really dressed for a business meeting," Don said, glancing down at his sweatshirt and body-contoured shorts, "but my DHI's got a problem of some kind and let me run long with my workout. I didn't think you'd mind."

Or perhaps you just wanted me to see how muscled and fit you are, Grayson thought. Perhaps your dress is perfect for the business you have in mind. "Not at all," Grayson said, "it's what you have to say that matters."

Wakamura turned his attention to the computer-generated painting replicas along the north wall. "I'd forgotten what a good painter you were," he said. "These are all self-portraits, aren't they? The Evolution of a Corporate Executive, eh?" He laughed — a little self-consciously, Grayson thought.

"For me it was painting," Grayson said. "For you it's the synthetar. We all need something to divert us from our duties and ambitions from time to time."

"When was this one done?" Wakamura asked, pointing to the first image in the series.

"In '09, I believe," Grayson said. He walked to his desk, which faced the sofa, and sat down in the Flex-Fit, letting it conform to and support his hips and back. While Wakamura studied the painting, Grayson picked up the polished piece of obsidian he used as both paperweight and "worry stone" and enjoyed the sensation of its cool hardness beneath his thumb. Could it really have been 99 years ago? At 29 he must have been just about Wakamura's present age.

"Wasn't Tenne Director then?" Wakamura had a strand of dark hair that stuck out at the crown of his head. It made him look like a boy. Too young to be a murderer. Perhaps his instincts were wrong on this one.

"No. Jack Reynolds was Director."

"Oh, yes. Reynolds." Grayson could tell by his tone of voice that he had heard the Reynolds story. It was a classic among assassination legends, after all. Wakamura turned to face him. His eyes were dark and bright. There was something about a

young person's eyes, set like clear, unsmudged glass in a new building — like his own eyes the day he succeeded Reynolds.

Grayson remembered staring at his image in the restroom mirror and scarcely recognizing the hard-angled features and severely trimmed, wheat-stubble hair as his own.

He had turned from that hardened face and concentrated on washing his hands until they were as pink as some of his paint-stained brushes.

He walked into the lobby and heard everybody's voice with chime-like clarity; smelled twenty brands of perfume and cologne; felt his own heart thudding behind his ribs.

He patted his jacket pocket to feel the hard assurance of the rectangular shape lodged there.

Grayson left the lobby and sat on an empty bench beneath a stand of carefully arranged aspens and tastefully trimmed juniper bushes. Aspen leaves whispered at his back. His boss, Reynolds, was late, of course. A trademark. He had no choice but to wait.

Finally, Reynolds's car rolled to a stop in its numbered space. Two doors hissed open and Reynolds's two "men" exited, one from each side of the car. They stood like Vikings against the perpetual overcast of the city as Reynolds emerged from the back seat. One preceded Reynolds and one trailed him as they approached Grayson and the Innovad building behind him. It didn't take an expert to see that these bodyguards were as much titanium and vatflesh as blood and bone. Grayson didn't care.

Reynolds smiled through his red mustache and talked with animation to his companions, though Grayson couldn't make out the words. The bodyguards laughed, even as they scanned the street scene. Their eyes rested on him briefly, then passed on. Sometimes Grayson thought of himself as truly invisible. He clutched his weapon, concealed in one sweaty hand.

"We need to discuss the Clifton account as soon as possible, Grayson," Reynolds said as they passed, not even pausing for an acknowledgment.

Grayson stood. "Jack C. Reynolds," he said, with only a slight waver in his voice, "I hereby declare an attempt at Succession by Assassination."

The bodyguards spun around to shield Reynolds before drawing their own weapons. By then the cloud of black slivers had already erupted from the two-by-three-by-one-inch rectangular solid in Grayson's hand. The bodyguards cut ragged tears in the cloud with their null field hand guns, but the remnants curled around the guards' bodies like smoke in a wind tunnel. The slivers reformed behind them and continued toward Reynolds. Had the man with the red mustache been an imposter or a simulacrum, the cloud would have hovered aimless-

ly until its elements lost power and drifted to the ground. But the figure that appeared to be Reynolds was indeed Reynolds, and the metal slivers homed on his unique assemblage of brain waves. They entered his nose, his ears, even his mouth as he opened it to scream. Grayson imagined them bursting in Reynold's brain, flickering fireflies of light in a forest of neurons.

Grayson shifted his focus from Wakamura's eyes to his own — the ones he had rendered with deft, bold strokes shortly after Reynolds's funeral — the ones that now seemed like black marbles thumbed into sockets of clay.

"I suppose we should get down to it," Wakamura said as he walked over to his briefcase and thumbed the access seals.

Grayson's attention snapped back to Wakamura. His heartbeat accelerated, as testified by both a throbbing at his temple and flashing digits on his Medband. Of course, Oscar would have sounded the alarm if the briefcase had contained any obvious mechanical, chemical or electromagnetic danger and could expand his Medband's already impressive library of chemical responses with an appropriate audio signal. Moreover, the Medband could augment his reflexes and physical skills if something less subtle lurked in Wakamura's mind. If he were Wakamura, how would he implement the Assassination Law? It would have to be "humane" ... i.e., "fast-acting" ... and "victim-specific" so that innocents weren't killed too. Poisons, directed radiations, microbots like he had used on Reynolds, certain biologicals ... all possibilities. But Oscar was armed with daunting defenses, and Grayson felt good about his own instincts.

Wakamura withdrew his C-pad and synthetar from the briefcase. "You'll love these visuals for Ecosafe," he said. "I've developed an audio track, too, I want you to hear." He touched the synthetar softly, as if it were a woman's hand. Grayson had watched and listened to him play several times before at a club that showcased local talent. He stroked, pressed and held the instrument like a lover and it responded in kind. The crowds never talked through his performances. They waited to hear the last echo of every chord.

"I know we could have gone through this at the office," Wakamura said, "but I wanted you to get a preview. Maybe this is not as great as I think ..." he fiddled with the programming on his pad "... but," he looked up and grinned, "I think it is."

Grayson had known his own art had been exceptional, too, although he never had been sure about that first self-portrait. Somehow he always looked like a stranger to himself. Others disagreed. "It's you," they said. "See the strong eyes and firm jaw. A man who knows what he wants and where he's



RAHAM

going. How else can a young man advance after his superiors qualify for the Longevity Treatments? How else can new ideas be tested? We admire you," they said, as they backed away from him. "Good job," they said, as they closed the door behind their retreating asses.

Wakamura extracted a monogrammed stylus from his briefcase and began sketching on the pad. He looked up at Grayson. "Can we project this on your holoivid stage? Oscar can tie me in, right?"

Grayson hesitated only a moment. "Tie him in, Oscar," he said. Grayson stroked the hard contours of his worry stone between thumb and forefinger while Oscar's programming signal chirped in synchrony with the flickering lights on Wakamura's C-pad console, then he carefully returned the stone to his desk top.

Grayson stood up. His Flex-Fit seemed to sigh as it let him rise. He walked to a position close to the stage, which took him past his second, third and fourth self-portraits. Each had been created after a successful assassination.

"That second portrait, there," Wakamura said, matter of factly, "I suppose there's a story behind that one, too."

"I did that one after succeeding Mary Stenwillot. She was a brilliant academic, but should have stayed out of commerpsych." Grayson's eyes met Wakamura's across the room. "Talented, knowledgeable people don't always make good directors, you know."

"I hear she had a weakness for mushrooms," Wakamura said, polishing the body of the synthetar with his sleeve.

"Loved certain edible *Amanitas*. Of course, a misidentification can be fatal." The fine webwork of lines on Grayson's forty-year-old image, in the shadows beneath his eyes and the parentheses around his mouth, reminded him somehow of fungal hyphae — as if some drifting *Amanita* spore had taken root in fertile soil.

"Now Frederick Tenne, he was vain, amoral, with an intelligence that was more shrewd than perceptive." Grayson approached portrait number three. "Sometimes a well-placed kick to the neck works best. A crushed windpipe thwarts the best body monitor."

"You look quite distinguished in that picture," Wakamura said.

Grayson wondered if he detected sarcasm. He sometimes thought of this portrait as Tenne's revenge. Although he was on Longevity treatments by then, which preserved his bush of dark hair, he had streaked it with gray, left his second wife, and pursued women whom he might have kissed as babies at company parties.

Number four, Triletska, was an incompetent in nearly everything but people management. His

passing caused Grayson to render his own ageless features in dark tones and quick strokes that made his face look almost translucent, as if he'd been mummified with spider's silk and set to rest in a candlelit cave.

But he had bested each of them in turn, collecting their life stories — their successes, failures — as well as their material obligations, as specified in the Assassination Responsibility Codes. He followed the rules. Often did more. Hadn't Tenne's youngest son, Teddy, even called him "Uncle Dennis" for a while? Grayson wondered how Teddy was doing. Perhaps he had his own string of murders to justify by now.

Grayson turned his back on the portraits and faced the holoivid stage. "Go when you're ready, Don," Grayson said.

The stage glowed, then sprang to life. Wakamura's images seemed to fill the center of the room. The Earth from space ... always dramatic. Pre-millennium shots, cloud decks, intense blue oceans ... gradually yellowing to the denser cloud fields of contemporary footage. Land areas began to speckle with spots and lines — the steady march of civilization. Satellite footage mixed with time-lapse records of bacterial growth on a plate of agar. Cancerous tendrils on some unidentified organ spreading like milk splattered on dark plastic. Cut to Earth suspended in a lunar sky, looking like a fragile shell of colored glass. It falls into an open human hand and begins to melt. Voice-over: "Don't let it slip between our fingers." Text: "Ecosafe products ... for all our tomorrows."

"Now," Wakamura said, "here's how the audio will tie in." He picked up the synthetar from the sofa, fingered the strings, and sampled a few keys. He backed up far enough to lean against Grayson's desk and began to play. The visuals started again from the top and gained strength and poignancy from the score. Grayson felt the sadness, the touches of humor, the shock in all the right places, even though he understood precisely how he was being manipulated. Hell, he had used many of the same techniques himself for the last seventy-five years — not always as well, he had to admit. Polymaska at Ecosafe would be pleased. He would mortgage his advertising account for this one.

Grayson walked back toward his desk, stroking his chin. "I don't know, Don. The Earth image stuff's been done a lot. Score is great, though. Helps the piece a lot. I think ... yes, I think Polymaska might go for it if ..."

"Might go for it?" Wakamura pushed himself away from the desk and turned on his heel to face Grayson. He raised his arms, tilted his head back, and gazed heavenward imploringly. "It's perfect," he said.

Grayson felt hairs rise at the back of his neck. The challenge was coming. He could feel it. The old

excitement began to fill him. Adrenaline's symphony buzzed in his ears. Grayson eased into his Flex-Fit. "Nothing's perfect, Don."

Wakamura tucked his synthetar under one arm, walked over to Grayson's desk and leaned on it, using his forearms like a pair of struts. "You love to snipe at my work. I can't remember the last time you offered a compliment that wasn't stuck to the back side of some criticism." He paused for a deep breath. "This piece is good. Really *good*. If you can't see it, you must be a fool." Wakamura's face reddened. "Or maybe your longevity booster is just past due."

Ah, yes, Grayson thought. The hate. How could he have missed it? Sometimes assassination was a cold necessity, like clearing the rubble of an avalanche from the roadway, but sometimes it boiled out of you and seared a path through obstacles that seemed malevolently permanent. That had been the way it had been with Gerald Clayton. He thought he could charm his way around anyone. He thought he was safe in his insulated, armored fortress of a home.

He wasn't.

And then Grayson did his fifth and final self-portrait — his last painting, in fact — in how many years? Grayson made a point not to look at this last picture. He should have had Oscar display something else. Anything else.

Wakamura stood back two paces from Grayson's desk and bowed stiffly. "Dennis C. Grayson," he said, "I hereby declare an attempt at Succession by Assassination."

Grayson nodded in acknowledgment. He felt truly alive, now, energized and ready, like an unlaunched missile. "You're foolish, Don. In my own home?" Grayson gestured to the walls. "I can cut you down at once or gas the room ..."

"You won't. Yet. You're curious. You're also confident you can counter any measures I use." Wakamura's voice was steady, but his forehead glistened in the soft room light.

Wakamura was right. The thrill came with pitting your skills, your brains, your determination against that of a worthy opponent. But was Wakamura worthy? Sitting at his desk, Grayson was in command of forces a general would have admired a hundred years ago. "I'm not surprised by the challenge, Don, but I'm a little hurt at your anger. I almost think of you as my ... well, certainly as a friend." Grayson fumbled absently for his worry stone; had to look down to find it. He touched it at the same time he realized it had been moved. It was wet.

"No!" he yelled, and he flung the stone away as if he had been burned. It spun off the polished desk before bouncing to a silent stop on the carpeting.

Wakamura played a few brief notes on his syn-

thetar. If it was a song it needed a lot of work. But it wasn't a song. The sound was pulsed, high-pitched ... like the song of some shrill, mechanical bird ...

Grayson composed himself, embarrassed by his violent reaction to being successfully tricked. "My Medband can counteract virtually any contact poison, Don. You've made a mistake." But doubt gnawed at Grayson's confidence.

"You recall the campaign we did a while back for the artist whose designs were based on mollusk shell patterns? There is a species of snail ..."

"*Conus*, of course. Tropical, Indo-Pacific distribution. The toxin is a quaternary ammonium compound." Grayson smiled and tried to read Wakamura's reaction. He blinked to clear the fuzzy image of Wakamura's face. "The Medband is prammed for *Conus* toxin ... " The words were difficult to pronounce and Wakamura's image came in and out of focus as if he were watching through a zoom lens. Grayson fought against panic.

"No longer," Wakamura said, absently stroking his synthetar with one hand.

"Sir, a pulsed audio signal has temporarily frozen program implementation on your Medband. I can rectify the problem in four minutes plus or minus thirty seconds," Oscar said.

Too late, Grayson knew. He tried to talk but only a squeak left his lips. Wakamura had beaten him. He had to admire him for that. It was the same kind of initiative that had impressed him years ago when Wakamura had brazenly engineered their first meeting to parade his songs and sketches before him — the venerable Director of Toshio-Innovad. But there was something important Wakamura must understand — something that only Grayson could explain.

Grayson felt weak and nauseated. His finger, where he had touched the stone, burned. The blurred form of Wakamura stepped forward and Grayson saw him tentatively extend a hand, as if to support him. But the hand was withdrawn. On the wall to Grayson's right the image of his last self-portrait danced in and out of focus. At its reduced size it was a sketchy, but distinct image of a weathered face, a diaphanous yellow veil on a field of dark blue and green. In the wall-sized original the face was not as immediately evident. The viewer saw a dark forest glade where menacing shadows hulked between the trees. The face, itself, was a cluster of fireflies dispersing, its living elements fleeing, golden flecks of light that gave eyes to the dark, demon shapes behind.

Grayson knew what he had failed to tell Wakamura. His assassin had no idea how his music would change. □

Ping Enclosed

By Robert V. Kozinets

Art by David Deitrick

The ceasefires bud, flower, wilt, and die, but the war against God goes on and on and on.

Welcome, my friend. We will watch the war together.

Welcome. From my house on the hill.

Tonight I gazed outside my grandiose windows and watched the brooding gray mountains that grope blindly into Hong Kong's formless gunmetal sky, and I thought of you when I saw these normal-looking mountains that are so abnormally inhabited by dragons. Yes, I thought of you.

I thought of your wisdom, and your novelty. And I decided that you, of all people, might understand. And please, my friend, do not think me strange when I tell you that I often hear the voices of the dragons, hoarsely whispering ancient tales, sounding as though they come from over a vast distance. And that some nights I hear distant screaming and wake in panic, wondering who or what is dying. And sometimes, I must confess, the screams are my own. These things, in such mythic times as we live in, I think you will agree can seem quite normal.

The dragons were at first silent tonight as I walked in the bitter, acrid rain. September rain, with Kowloon's dragons slogging along behind me through the melting copper-red muck, the swish of their tails as metronomic as wiperblades echoing my footsteps. A witchy wind cackled through the trees as they spoke, and I felt my heartbeat quicken and amplify their doomsday spell.

They didn't know, as I did, that their evil whispers would soon cease. They didn't know that I had planned to enlist your aid in order to silence them forever.

Hong Kong's rain was more acid than vinegar, and the news had been issuing hourly warnings about its radioactivity. Another powerplant had been sabotaged in the democratic riots somewhere on the coast, up around Dongguan. China's free zones, the hyper-developed area from Kowloon to Shekou right up to Guangzhou, were under attack again.

I completed my hike up the mountains until I could almost see Repulse Bay in the distance, the tall white highrises stretching out of the gloom above the smudges of rusty clay that marked the camps of four generations of Vietnamese refugees. I spent a long time there in silent thought, wondering if my plan would ever filter down to them, to

their war, until the sting of rain won out over me, and I descended, going back to my precious haven, and Emalita.

From behind me the vitriolic voices of the dragons broke in a chorus of hissing curses.

Once the great rosewood door to my mansion was shut I molted my soaking clothes and walked naked up the spiral stairway into the war-room.

Everything had been prepared. Emalita was standing at the door with a red silk robe outstretched, her dark face deeply grooved but still girlishly sweet, her black netted hair laced with silver streaks, her dark Mexican eyes serious with concern.

"You should not walk outside in the rain like this, Meester Sparrow," she said. "You no want to get sick again."

"Emalita, my dear. You know it's always raining these days. I can't avoid it. I have to get outside sometime."

"Pff," she puffs. She is getting fatter, I notice, as she vigorously towels my body down from toes to groin, patting dry my chest, ruffling my bald head. Were she to swell to five hundred pounds, I would still love my sweet Emalita all the same. My Emalita. She has been faith and lifeline, helper and frequent lover in these dark years since my beloved Lisa's foul murder.

"You've turned off the TVs, haven't you, Emalita? Why did you do that?"

"Meester Sparrow, what you need the TV on all the time for, huh?"

"There are wars, so many wars to follow. *My wars*, Emalita, *your wars*."

"They're not my wars."

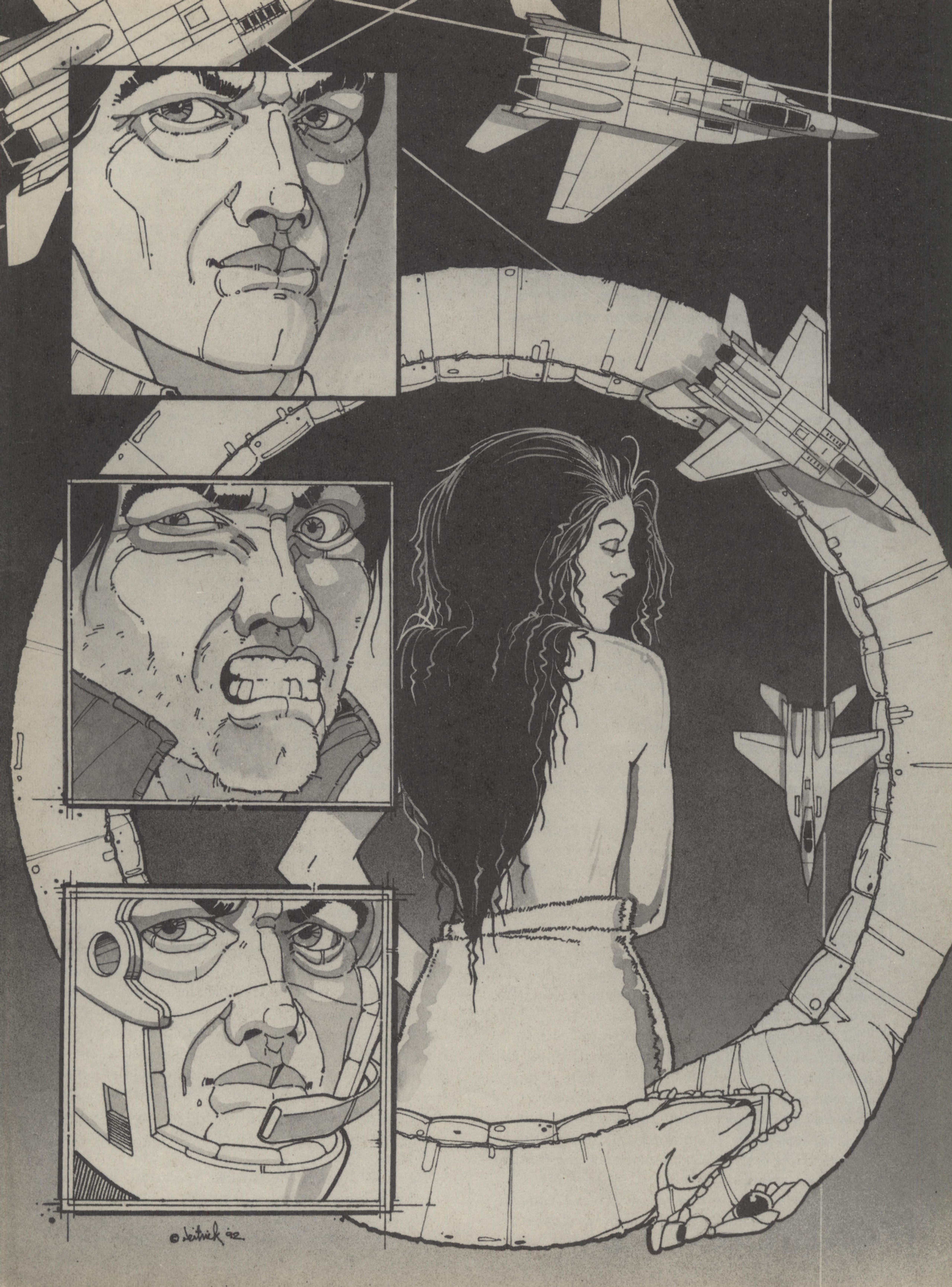
"They're all our wars. Yours and mine."

"No way they're not," she says defiantly.

As she finishes drying me, she covers me with a robe. She folds the towel and heads downstairs to make me my customary cup of Korean ginseng tea, then pauses in the doorway.

I catch her before she can speak. "Bring me the book, please, Emalita."

"Not again with the book," she says, hands on her expansive hips. "Why you want that thing for?" Her



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eyes sparkle; she senses something erotic in my movements.

There have been so many women since my wife's murder. And the years of living in constant wartime have widened the faultlines of my spirit. It is a shame, my dear friend, and I feel regret with every motion, but I never seem to stop myself in time. Like my yoga, sex has become mere exercise.

I shrug my robe off onto the icy marble floor. In the hall mirror I admire my pectorals, biceps, deltoids, as I flex and hold them tense. I am very proud of this body. I have none of the flabby muscle tone that curses most men my age. I thank my daily yogic practice for that. That, the RNA washes, and the HGH drugs. I stride to the bar, feeling the gentle sway of my organ against my leg, and pour myself and Emalita a brandy.

As I hand her the drink, and lead her to relax on the couch, she positions her rump next to mine on the velveteen couch and traces a delicate map on my downsloping leg, tentatively vectoring in on my groin. Her hands are warm and soft, well-versed in this terrain. "You will have me?"

I reach under the silk hem of her skirt and touch bare stockings. I instruct her, and she obeys ...

Outside the war-room's great dome window, the rain is a pestilence. Vindictive lighting shatters over the gloomed presence of Ping, ninth of Kowloon's nine peaks, named for a child emperor who was reckoned a dragon. I believe I can hear his childish voice at the start of a thunderclap, drowning in a growl ...

As sweat slickens it, Emalita's skin feels eely smooth underneath me. It is an effort for me to thrust, but the war demands these sacrifices of love, of passion, mocking echoes of parched vitality. And so I thrust.

The TV screens come on. Street wars rage below. Space wars above. Military coalitions, religious and industrial wars circle, mate, intertwine, thrust, take on new alliances, return to old enemies. Wars against the sky, against the trees, the water. All one big War, insane and hideously glorious, infinitely human.

Emalita's heat beneath me is lunar, white. Her eyes are twin moons, open and upturned. Fire, fire without heat. The tempo quickens.

Lit up by lightning, the homes that tickle these mountains burst into vision, constructions of silk and transistors, cameras and cheap jewelry, tailored suits and ivory carvings. As the spasm of release overtakes me, I go to cobra and stretch my widening eyes up to the giant HDTV screen where the announcer is fervently chanting the one-minute-to-midnight news.

And then even the blessed war news joins my body as it recedes into the distance for a cold instant. As if from a point exterior to me, I give in and

observe the expansion, the shiver, the shockwave of expurgation, the precious exhaustion.

Emalita squeals, realizing her satisfaction time is limited. She raises her coarse groin against me and grinds. Propped up by bent elbows and flat palms on the satin bedsheets, I hold myself steady for a magnanimous minute, shrinking.

Emalita groans, thrashes, then screeches in Mexican. Her husband died during the Mexican revolution of '96.

Like me with Lisa, she still often shouts his name as orgasm draws its flush face near.

After the flush has faded, my hand wanders from chin down her breast, and back to her face.

"The book, now, my Emalita."

"The book," she says, quietly slips on my robe and slides out of the war-room. I pull my remote close to me and finger it, and eleven screens light up brighter with war news.

It becomes justified, this eating of the mescal worm. The story, as you will soon see, has made it all so clear.

Truly, these evil tubes feeding into me are good things. They have been with me in different forms all along, from umbilicus onwards. They've toughened me and made me of the world, like slow poisons that grant immunity from disease. That's how I've withstood the murder of my wife, the cancer of my son, the all-too-obvious sighting of the end.

*I'm reading the papers and watching TV.
And the blood and despica are all I can see.
The saints have gone fishing and the star's
snorting tea.*

*I hope you'll come watch with me,
watch with me,
watch with me.*

Emalita returns with a silver tray full of steaming food which I ignore, and the book.

She stands before the screen with me agape at the faces of war: gas masks clambering through mutant rain forests, sacrificial hospital babies in bombed-out altared craters, drugflow victims on Hyper-scream imploding in the Western streets, War Council animation simulations of space weaponry raining laser fire, exploding plasma warheads, children kicking the rotting corpses of soldiers, and the endless repeats of the terrorist mushroom cloud that signalled the beginning of this round. Dongguan will be next, then Shekou, then here, Kowloon.

Because my fortune dwarfs her mind, Emalita thinks I have answers. Her long lashes come together and she shakes her saddened head. Her dark eyes are tender as she touches my shoulder.

"How can all this happen, Señor Sparrow? How can all this happen if there is truly a God?"

A prefab answer is easiest to that, that God gave us all free will. But faced with the vast grandeur of destruction, I'm just as lost as she is. Perhaps, because I can appreciate so much of the scope of it, more so.

I take the book. And there is the story. And in that story I find, as I hope you, too, my friend, will find, great relief. Profound relief.

It must have been in my library for decades, bound between volumes of *Galaxy* and *Fantastic Stories* and *IF. Wonder Space War Stories*. A small fan publication, likely, cheap typeset, crude linedrawn graphics. But between its pages I had found a story, this story, my story, like a white hole leading into clarity.

On first reading, the story repulsed me. On second, it delighted. On the third, it began to adjust itself to me, like an opalescent mood ring of old, and that was when the sudden disintegration began.

For you see, I am just a fan of science and fiction. I was a great businessman, a shaper of products, of demands and distribution networks, a denizen of annual reports and boards and stockholder meetings. I was never a great literary man, even less a scientist. But I have become a driven man, a haunted man. And I have no explanation for it, so I come to you.

The story has dispossessed me.

Come. Let me share it with you (it is enclosed).

The Interlock

By P. Anthony DeLamontaigne

His name, although his name is not important, since truly he is universal — in every city crawling along every major street, a creature of the world we have made him, fitting in neatly and inexorably to that niche we have carved him — was, strangely enough, Willy Judge.

His occupation: addict.

His ultimate motivation: the greatest high imaginable — Preprogramma Neurona.

Willy Judge drags himself down the street, direction be damned, burning for a fix of the drug that will send him rocketing out into space. Twenty bucks, then find Tim.

Better people sideswipe him with glances, their conservative suits and gasmasks like crosses they carry. But at least, he thinks, he is free.

Willy Judge's world is the junkie's void. His colorless wolfine eyes crave beneath a nest of ant-infested hair. His beard is rusting steel wool, and as it scrapes it cleans the familiar ground. He is blessedly free of worries as he crawls on all fours

along the sidewalk, hunger punching holes that bleed in his stomach, hypo addiction growing needier and needier.

Find Tim. Twenty bucks.

Like bookends, a set of exec assholes in stockbroker suits and fashionable mini-airmasks step over him and, drawing back for the spring effect, he reels an English wool pantleg in, shoves it in his teeth, dog bark growling.

"Jesus Christ! What the hell's going on? You crazy old man."

Blank eyes up, Willy sees fear in the suit's gasmasked face. He throws Willy change. The other bookend circles behind, gets ready to kick.

"I got AIDS, kid. And I'll bite ya, I swear I will." He sentences the friend with an admonishing glare, looks hungrily at the scrawny leg proffered him, tasty.

"Here, here ..." The leg wanders hastily through his wallet. "All I've got is ten bucks, okay?" The ten flutters to the pavement.

"Only half a bite then." Willy Judge licks the leg and grins. He can see the suit shiver as he says, "Twenny." The other bookend throws another ten. The price of release, for both of them.

Willy Judge rolls over, pulls himself up along a parking meter, checks for cops and checks his pockets to find his hypo's clear, ready to load. Twenty bucks a crack, for a hypodynamic snack. Preprogramma Neurona.

Autopilot for the next bit: stumbling through the streets, falling down licking sewer's grille, down where he belongs, down where the goblins grow, below below below. Cockroaches skeet across his face and yellow hands and it don't matter if it's a downtime hallucination or not because now he is *hurtin*.

Tastes of Choppy the Void: the candle slit and it's black, wasted Crowleyesque rites within a found pair of stained elephantine Levi jeans, a dead cat breathing maggots, garbage for dinner, looking for Tim in all the same old places always Tim asking for Tim where the bloody damned hell's Tim? After dinner he squirms along the gutter, the street's in his sweat and his heart rasps and wheezes.

His mind is gone but he can't remember and so he crawls and there's dogshit on his hand now and garbage and he's in a park. Waking up again, head blasted from shit nothing out of somewhere.

It's blank to nuclear day one, the light jinxing him, talking to himself sleeping next to his shit and despair on the dead grass. For breakfast he puked up the yin yang by a ripped-apart tree stump, later woke up again spread out on the flaking red bench in the park in the rain, with Tim.

Tim is godlike, his blue eyes dead in the noonlight, lifeless gems set in the lunar landscape of his face, wearing ripped jeans and a Nike sweatshirt,

and a burlap backpack strapped on. He watched Willy waken, bobbing the brittle gray mohawk on his head as he himself slowly phased into life. The open scar that served as his mouth writhed and he said, "Ay how you hangin in there, ol zombie frienda mine."

"Still here, Timmy man." He gives his dealer's hand a scat-slide. "Bin lookin forya."

"I know that, zom. Thas why I found you. Watchin out for you huh?" He touches Willy's shoulder gently. His skin is dry and cool. "You hurtin, Willy?"

Willy nods, bites his lip, taste of blood still warm.

Tim scans the park and pulls a snaketube full of pink liquid lumiglobes from his backpack. "I got your special blend. The spaceman. The combat stuff."

"AVB-one-eleven-A," Willy says, and his heart throttles furious. "I got money for you too. I gotta twenny."

"Good man." Tim's dextrous smile brandishes chipped teeth. The money disappears into the pack, and a plexivial of thick rosy liquid rises to replace it. Willy holds the snaketube with shaking hands next to his hypo. It's too beautiful for the moment to even shoot.

"They goddess new shooter, Willy. Sez it come from Germany, eh? Smart jab, all gas man, don't have to do no more pricking, no more searchin around with the needle. Now ain'at somethin?"

"Don't need no new needles, man. This old blue-sky clapper, she do me just fine."

"Oh you don't know. This new needle got laser probing, got all these digitals and buttons and stuff."

Willy, now into it with genuine interest, "Yeah?"

"It got a store of ammonia, self-sterilizin. An it shoot into them tiny little arteries, give dose big veins a rest, ay? No more cave-ins. No more big bruises, man. No more redflagging it."

"No more redflaggin, hey?"

"No shit down, zom."

"Well, I could use one of those then," Willy Judge says, pulling back his sleeve to expose tracks scragglier than Amtrak maps. "Howmucha day cost, huh? Probly high tech stuff cost me way more, hell I got nothing noways, still I could use it you know."

"Yeah, me too. But you could, Willy, you really could."

"Mebbe get some money scraped up together from somewhere. I sure could use it now you mention it, yeah, you know. Mebbe you see one pick it up lemme try it."

"It's high tech."

"Hi-tech, huh? Yeah, I could use it, man. My arms is falling apart."

Shaking Willy ker-chuckles as he wraps his sleeve around the arm just above the elbow and puts it in his teeth. He pulls tight and slaps the sagging beef hard on the side.

"My keepin you? You wanna vacate now?"

Willy said maybe no. He wanted to wait. He wanted to look at the beautiful globes in the hypo just a second more, savor them even though he was dying for it, like he was a true goddamned *artiste of addiction*, okay?, lost in them underwater bouncing neurochemspheres, their music a sphere music exclusive for his ears, their dance a ballet of celestial Kandinsky orbs, so free, so full of Aristotelean perfection they made his brain positively *undulate*.

"You wanna little restup first afore you go off inta spaceman, zom? Don't blame yuh, goin. Here," he slips him a pill, "you try dis."

Tim's gone, and daylight with him.

Willy oozes pastily off into the black alleys, galvanized by garbage cans and reeking stinks of byzantine gangways. Past vans shaking rumblefucked, sleezoid chimp chicks geezering hokies and lipping it off to pimps, past asses pinched and probed with bovine jubilation, towards the zen space of nirvana ballou. Of the spheres. Of Preprogramma Neurona.

And orbiting the sun of a lamppost spotlight, he's propped up against cans and green garbage bags, fixing up for it now. The needle is filled with worms.

No, they're spheres, large and small, voluminous tapestries of liquid dancing esprangelo on the limpid breeze, glittering like piss in the wind. And the weirdness of the world whispers life in Willy Judge's ear and he smiles and welcomes it in.

The stark tip of the needle scrapes along the curved ridge of his inner elbow. He jabs it in and nothing. It coulda been wood. Moves the needletip a little further to the right, near a gnarled clump of blue veinbruises that have geysered so well for him before.

Nothing, but maybe he should push a little harder. Harder. It's in like it was butter now, poking around from inside make him angry — come on, come on already — looking for the vein, twisting it side to side around in there and pushing harder.

And finally it gushers, the blood plumes up into the liquid, red fireworks ascending then rushing back home as he plunges it in, the globes dissolving into thoughts, into his thoughts, into codes, schemata, into mnema

Moxie!" Willy turns, regaining regality. *It is he. I am he.* He is standing on the tarmac, concise beneath the clear dark Arctic sky. He is Willy no more, the memory fading into echoes of Erebean vastness. For now, he is Commander Olympius "Moxie" Tournamentitis.

A crisp blue uniform encloses him, and his golden buttons sparkle in the moonlight. He runs a hand through a short bush of closely cropped blonde hair, so soft and neat. He catches a reflection of his face

in the polished midnight side of his Hellfighter warplane, and sees his features smooth as polished marble, blue eyes clear as planets, muscles bulging just underneath the uniform. It is truly glorious to be Moxie. But Moxie has a mission to perform.

And he is ready for combat.

"Yes, Sir," he shouts, his words a resounding slap in the cool night air as his salute launches out and away.

The red uniform of Coalition Commander Watanabe is satin-smooth with two long silver stripes across its left shoulder. The officer's eyes address his with resolute admiration.

"Targets understood, Commander?"

"Aye aye, Sir."

"Well, good luck, Moxie."

"Thank you, Sir."

Moxie Tournamentitis watched the airfield below shrink into a black blot on the white snowscape. There was no freedom that could touch being Mach 8 at 30,000 and being a war hero, no feeling that could emulate this gentle perfection, the unity of man and machine, contained by the worthwhile sense of purpose, nurtured by the rich *meaning* to it all.

And yet, as he went to bomb the Africans, he couldn't help but think of them, their villages. Behind the threatening muzzles of their rocket launchers and tracers pointed up at him were people, people whose purpose had been perverted by an insatiable fiend who had threatened their families and forced them to fight. People who only wanted to stay alive, who prayed for this war to end. These thoughts were foreign to Moxie, who revelled mainly in the glory of it. Perhaps this was what they meant by a moral awakening, although the army had done its best to foresee this eventuality.

He touched a channel and sweet songs of victory collided in his cockpit, the speakers roaring with Wagnerian cymbal crashes and drums as his Hellfighter skimmed over the dark oil-stained waves, scooting over carcasses of seabests huge and small. The plane came alive, the rush of feelings made the moment come brilliant. Targets beckoned up ahead, and it all came so smoothly, the dark ground so fleshy underneath, so vulnerable as man and computer and warplane became one

Stellar ecstasy is never far away, for the harbinger of light. Never very far away at all.

The bombs dropped. And then the unexpected. Impact. The shock wave, and the plunge.

It's a small cowardice but Olympius Moxie Tournamentitis hides it well. It's a small cowardice but as the plane rumbles downward, he tumbles upward, sliding facefirst to the spaceground, sucking the pill sewn tight into its cheekpocket into his mouth.

Ping Enclosed

Atropine crumbles. His heart goes red, then black. The walls close in. The thought of escape punctuates his every thought-breath, every momentflicker drenched in the pissmell stream of bullets, the moment eternity of fear. And he thinks over and over and over again of a word and the word is jihad.

The four walls close him in. Air pressure, filters compensating but too late for the great Moxie Tournamentitis. Vapid compression of a billion neural scavengers. Sanctimonious afterthoughts again and again of escape. But the catch is broken, the metal hinges fused, and the plastic bubble impregnable.

Fall crying to the ground why the hell should he? Except that Moxie Tournamentitis — Commander Moxie Tournamentitis — can see that it is wearing off now, it's beginning to phase, the walls are turning to webs of light, highlighting where he Willy is, a jai-alai hardball screaming from the needles in the street, the dark and needs some more ...

Coiled slinky shapes re-jar. Respond. Boiled lesions: poorly soldered empty soldiers and cross-hatched wailing baby-faces return.

Shattered glimpses reform.

It doesn't matter how much Willy Judge pukes tonight for he shall always remember the glory of the piercing, of the runway and the storm. GOD CLEAR US ALL. For thrash and whither the enemy.

Doubled over through a hail of puke these glory words commend him. Through the cough of breaking bile these sweet memories defend him:

O, distended belly of the beast, I'd wondered why you'd come to feast on such a low and scurrilous prey as me until I saw what lives inside of me. Through the shaking and vibration caught up in the insulation from the victories to the penetration the fount of wisdom entering me from deep within I dare to see the reader.

I see you, Alfred. A Sparrow falling in.

On radar.

Willy Judge wants to cry. Moxie was so perfect, so much a part of him, that he knows this is the dream, this corroded impossible streetlife of his, he knows his glory is in the clouds, in the sky. On the page, in your mind.

His hand has found something here in the gargaworld, clutched with primeval instinct some totem. He looks at the object in his grasp. A bottle, an old bottle of mescal, only a puddle left of the thick amber-colored liquid sitting on the bottom. And a worm, too, a big one.

And in a voice in his head, the worm talks to Willy Judge.

"I came up screaming, like you just did," the worm says, in a regal voice, "from the intestinal darkness, passed through, shitted out by a Haitian voodoo

priest in a feverish nightmare of prickling porcelain horror. I'm shrunk now, due to the obvious brightness of the sun, but I used to be twenty-three feet long, a blind specimen of *bothriocephalus latus* as awesome as the mightiest of constrictors."

And as it talked it squirmed evocatively, and Willy Judge felt pity for it, picturing the poor thing as it once was, twisting and bloody as a newborn, an inch-thick white string shoved unready into the light.

"Eat me."

Eat the worm, he thought.

It's at the bottom of the bottle now, from the twisted insides of someone else. So go ahead now. And eat the war, eat the war, eat the worm.

And then sing with me, "The world is cold and lonely only what a place to be. The Brotherhood commends you won't defend you no matter what you say or see." Go ahead, do it, then sing.

Willy Judge, without flinching, tilted the bottle back, sucked, fished the thing out with his tongue, and without chewing ate the whole worm.

And in the war, those who ate the shit of others did very, very well.

Stars filled his eyes, became his eyes and Willy Judge could see out, out of the bottle, out of his meat, out of the alleyway he had cornered himself into, out of the page, the book, out into the mind, your mind, old man, the Sparrow that falls, Willy sees out from inside you, out into the Kowloon night that surrounds you as you contemplate strangling the dragons that have haunted you for so long.

Interlock.

This is interlock. Ourobouros we can devour ourselves just as easy, my tail in your mouth one world, one war, one living reptile piece of exorbitant meat left to rot in the street, in the city mountain village, in the burning wreckage of a warplane.

Go ahead, old man, do it.

We're waiting for you.

And that is where the story ends. You can see, I hope my friend, why I am chilled by it.

For God's sake, it now calls me by name!

I must put the book down and catch my breath for a few seconds, caught so thoroughly was I in the bandaged bondage of the story. The words on the pages have changed yet again, reformulated to encompass me. Interlock.

The storm outside pounds its battledrums. The casualties flare across eleven wallsize HDTV screens. I think I hear gunfire and gang screaming in the distance, but my mansion is well-protected. The only interlopers are dragons. They hiss like goddamned madness how I wish that they would stop!

Still I must tell you. At a certain point in my ever-more-frequent readings of the story, I realized

something.

Correct me please my friend if I am wrong, but years ago the media and the warmasters had chanced to discover that subservience to the war could suddenly become the in-thing. The war was at first a mystery monstrosity, but it snuck up on us, from beneath us, and seeded us with its surprising excitement. It planted the worm in our meat and in our thoughtforms.

Originally, I'd taken in as much of it as I could, cloaked as it was in Trojan horsetalk of tech, progress, and peace, and meaning — as we now know — exactly the opposite.

And though the pestilence defeated us and the pustulence infected us, we pandered on. We bowed shoeless to the burning war bush but all the while we knew. We just knew inside that there was no interlock ... not like just ... not like now ... not while the sky tumbled and roared with the squish of crushing babies under tanks (yes, I hear your moan of offended sensibilities) and the scudtastic sunshined brightly on bomblastic doll faces and masks and plastic stripes and stars sang down in perpendicular bewilderment. In the summer. And the winter. Of the fall.

And so I slowly interpreted the story to mean what it was, a rip in reality so obvious that only my simple money-making mind could have overlooked it. And now the rip continues, with what is going on, the you lending me your thoughts, beside me inside me wondering what and why, the tempting dazzle of spurting blood, the craving for the taste of raw meat, another man's pain, the fluid black oil slicks of the soul, guilt of the warping mind.

Like Moxie with Willy, and Willy with me, I feel you too, inside me.

Yes I feel you, my friend. For I realize in the instant I am writing this, catching this insight so fresh on the page that it sparkles in my eyes, that the dragon voices are not dragons, *they are you*. I am hearing your background thoughts, as you read this. Inside me, and me inside you. I can feel you.

Our intimacy is shared and tender mortality, is it not? It is one tender mama, crushingly pulsating like a policeman boogaloo. The tide washing away the old tears of a matter-bound Lenin Walrus. This is how we kill the dragon, the worm, by becoming aware of it, sharing our infections, bringing them out into the oblivious sun. Twisting and biting each other and our sisters mothers fathers brothers on the tail, drinking deep from the skull keg of life's fluidity, singing along and dancing and swallowing again and barfing it up of course the worm I can feel you. I can feel you.

I Can Feel You ...

□

Deezee

By James C. Glass

Art by Jon Foster

It was on a clear, warm evening after an infrequent rain shower that John Winkle realized the feelings for his tiny Colanatrae student had passed the affection stage and were approaching something akin to love. It was not a sexual feeling, though the Colanatrae were certainly humanoid enough for that to be possible. Their quick mastery of the Lyrae dialect was astonishing to the entire team. But the clear sound of Deezee's lovely voice as she read from Ringley's *Songs of the Beginnings* and the way her large, oval, violet eyes kept looking up at him for a reaction stirred within him a longing to remain with her even after the session was over and he was expected to return to the pre-fab the team had been allowed to erect outside the city.

Loneliness, perhaps, with Myrae now married to a spacer on Platform Four, giving up on John's return since his career had surged ahead as youngest of the planetfall team. The bitter price of ambition and success. And he was good at his job.

Deezee closed the book and sighed. "I think it is an unhappy story. You seem never content, always moving from place to place, leaving behind cities and even entire worlds you have built. The book speaks of sadness in departing, of leaving children and parents, and still you fly away as if it is never enough. Why do you do this, Jon-athon? Why is it never enough?"

John smiled. "It's curiosity that drives us, Deezee, not discontent. Each world is something new with its own uniqueness and challenges, but space is our real home. A few stay behind, but for most of us the idea of being confined to one world is like putting a wild animal in a cage. Don't the Colanatrae have any desire to see other worlds, maybe even find a place better than Anghyen, where you don't have a sun that blasts you with ultraviolet radiation all the time?"

"We have adapted," said Deezee, "and it will not always be this way. History tells us that before the great purple light appeared, and Angh was with us, much of our lives were spent outside and there were plants and even great trees growing freely on our lands."

"We've seen the remains of some," said John, and watched Deezee fingering the golden figurine hanging from the chain around her neck — a humanoid, looking upwards, arms reaching, huge moth-wings longer and wider than the body. The image of Angh,

goddess of the Colanatrae. "Some of the trees must have been hundreds of years old when the flare erupted."

"Many generations ago, yes," said Deezee. "It will again be so. The flare will go away and Angh will return to us from the House of Life and our lives will be different. Not better, Jon-athon, but different. We adapt to change, we do not fly away to find it."

"Then we're not so different," said John. "Both of us seek change in our own ways and adopt a lifestyle for that purpose. We've seen this trait in all the intelligent beings encountered across half a galaxy to the rim where you live. All this life, Deezee, yet there are similarities, things in common. Somehow we are all connected. We have a common source."

"Angh is the source of life," said Deezee gravely, and crossed her petite brown wrists over the shiny pendant. "She dwells in the House of Life where all being is manifested and where we return to her in death to begin again. This is our way, Jon-athon, and we are content with it." She cocked her head to one side, bow mouth curling into a faint smile. "Your life source is not here, and you must search further for it."

He found her perception amazing for one who had led a sheltered life and was only now approaching maturity. "The House of Life, that is the large dome at the center of your city? That is where you were born; began life?"

"Yes," she said.

"Do you have any memories of the place?"

"No, I was an infant when my guardian received me. My first memory is of this room. What is your first memory, Jon-athon?"

"My mother holding me, looking down at me, laughing when a family pet licked my face. I didn't like that."

Deezee smiled again. "And your mother, you came directly from her body?"

"Yes, that is the human way."

"It is an interesting concept," said Deezee.

"We — *are* different in many ways, Deezee, but I hope we can be friends and trust each other. We want you to know everything about us and we want to know about you. That's why I was assigned to your guardian. To educate, and ask questions."

"My guardian is important to you?"

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"We're talking to him about developing the mineral resources you don't use on this planet, but we don't really know who we're talking to, what his responsibilities are. He was our first contact here, and seems to be influential."

"Dananghyan is of the first circle of the faithful, one of the six advisors for our city. There are several other cities, far from here, but only one is within a night's travel. We are each self-sufficient."

"There's no dominant leader here — say in the House of Life? What goes on there, Deeze?"

"It is the beginning and the end, and the dwelling of Angh. I have told you this, Jon-athon."

A low tone sounded from a blue crystal placed near the door, which opened quickly to admit a red-robed servant who stood rigidly at attention. "Is it time already?" asked John, surprised.

"This is Chinanghyan — you would say our night of prayers. You must leave a little early. What should I prepare for tomorrow?" Deeze stood up, her body a cylindrical shadow beneath the white robe, and folded her hands together.

"Continue reading Ringley's book and try to finish it. The love poem to his dead wife presents the sum of human feelings and I'd like to have your reaction to it. The poem looks into the human soul."

"Your inner self," said Deeze. "Would you like also to learn of our inner being, Jon-athon?"

"I would like that very much," he said.

"Then I have a gift for you, for my teacher." She walked past him, her head at the level of his chest, and he smelled a spicy fragrance like cinnamon. From a book-filled recess in a wall she took a small, thin volume bound in silver metal and handed it to him. On the cover, in red, was the winged figure of the goddess Angh. Delicate pages were filled with Colanatraen script, without illustrations. John thumbed them carefully. "It is a short history," she said, "from the days of Angh, the time that will come again in the future. It is what we live for, what we prepare for."

"We have a scanner that will translate this for me, Deeze. I thank you for your gift."

"And then I will answer your questions, as you answer mine."

"We will teach each other," he said, and smiled. The pleased look on her face, the way she momentarily averted her gaze, made him smile. He wanted to touch her hand, but dared not. The servant looked impatient and gestured him towards the door. "I will see you tomorrow, then."

"I will be waiting," said Deeze.

John nodded his head in a slight bow of respect and left the room, brushing past the stoic servant who followed him silently down a hallway to the shady entrance of the dome-shaped dwelling where the rover was parked. Thick quartz windows shielded him from the dangerous shower of

ultraviolet and soft X-rays from the red Colanatraen sun now down at the horizon, the purplish appendage that was a flare of mass transfer frozen in place for centuries by the presence of the companion dwarf just outside the edge of the vast chromosphere. How long could the little star survive? How long before the return of the days of Angh, or an explosion that would incinerate the Colanatrae and their House of Life?

John Winkle drove away from the inner circle of dwellings surrounding the massive House of Life, the inner circle of the privileged, the faithful of Angh, along one of the spokes of the wheel-like city to outer circles where the working class lived and kept their shops, many traveling only by night to labor in the hydroponic farms miles away. Even at dusk he saw no life on the sandy streets of this hostile planet. They wait for a change, he thought, that might never come.

Anna Kajiensky was thrilled by the little book Deeze had given to John, and she sent it to the scanning room. It was the only thing worthwhile the team had brought in that week, and as team leader she had failed again to gain entrance to the House of Life. "Dananghyan was nice about it, but all that polite rhetoric just added up to a firm no. I'm surprised Deeze gave you this, John, and it must have been on her own because her guardian is the most secretive representative I've ever dealt with. We've seen the shops and farms, but six months and we still know nothing about their physiology or politics or religion."

"Deeze said the book is a history."

"It's a start. And they worship a winged female god. And the House of Life is a very important place. I have got to get in there. How did you manage to get the book from Deeze?"

"She gave it to me. We'd been discussing Ringley's book on the expansion history and she was quite interested in it." John recounted their discussions, the questions she'd asked, the way she cocked her little head to one side when she was puzzled about something.

Anna made a teepee of her hands in front of her face. "I do believe you're fond of her, John."

"She's very bright, and a good student. I find my sessions with her stimulating."

"I don't mean that," said Anna. "I mean you are fond of her — personally. It shows on your face. Careful, John, we don't need an incident now. Dananghyan may be secretive, but when he found out about our manufacturing capabilities he seemed quite eager to talk about a trade with raw materials that have barely been touched. We're sitting on a treasure chest here, John. Be cautious."

"You don't have to tell me that, Anna. This is my fourth assignment."



"Yes, and you've done well, but you've been away from the ship six months with a team of married folks all old enough to be your parents, and along comes Deezee."

"You don't have anything to worry about," said John. "I know what I'm supposed to do."

They sat in light filtered by a fabric of spun quartz draped across the single slit-window in her spartan room of simple, sandstone furnishings. Deezee yawned, looked up from the book, head cocked to one side. "Why would he carry his dead wife to a planet he had never seen before, Jon-athon? It seems to me a waste of space for things he would badly need."

"But he needed her there, Deezee. Ringley and his wife had begun the journey together and they would finish it together. He buried her on Browne's planet and never traveled again, and when he died they put him next to his wife. The original farmhouse and the graves are now part of a park in the center of a great domed city called Yeneveh. They are forever together, and 'Songs of the Beginnings' has become a classic of what we call our expansion literature. Did you like it?"

"It is again unhappy to read. Humans see death as a final act of life, with nothing beyond."

"No, there are religions that teach various concepts of new life after death, and many humans believe these things. But when a loved one dies, the loss is real and permanent and no unproven theory of an afterlife really takes the pain away."

"Humans become strongly attached to each other, I see. Our lives are more solitary, but we are related through Angh, who brought forth all of us. For the faithful there is death, but new life to follow. I believe this, Jon-athon."

"But if you died tomorrow I would miss you, Deezee, and feel a sense of loss. I would miss our conversations, answering your questions, listening to you read. I would miss being here with you and if you had a new life somewhere else my loss would be unchanged."

Deezee parted her lips as if to speak, then turned towards the window in silence, her child-sized hands smoothing the cover of Ringley's book lying open in her lap. When she turned towards him again her expression was more serious than he had ever seen before. "I think I understand," she said and then her face brightened. "I wish you also to understand us. Have you read our history, the book I gave to you?"

"I will do that tonight. The pages were so thin we had to make an image-enhanced copy for the scanner. Tomorrow you will be my teacher. For the rest of today I would like to show you where our worlds are, and where we are here. This is the universe that is within reach of us now, Deezee, and we call it our

local galaxy." He withdrew from his case a fold-out transparency of the galaxy with many stars highlighted in red. "We have come from here, thousands of years ago, to find you clear out on the edge, right here." He pointed at a red speck at the very edge of the galaxy.

Deezee yawned again, reached out a hand to touch the speck that was her sun. As she did so, the robe pulled back up her slender arm.

A patch of gray had appeared on the golden fuzz-covered skin of her forearm, and was reaching beyond the elbow.

I've asked repeatedly to see Dananghyan, but the servants ignore me. There's something wrong with her, Anna, and it's spreading."

"Have you asked Deezee about it?"

"No. She seems fine, maybe a little tired, and she makes no effort to hide the thing on her arm. If I point it out I might be insulting her for all I know. But I don't think it's healthy."

"Wish I could tell you something, John," said Anna, "but we've never seen anything like it before. Not that many females to look at. The ratio of male to female is roughly eight to one and we haven't found a single female living permanently outside the two inner circles of the city."

"I have no formal audiences with Dananghyan. Can you get one for me?"

"I'm seeing Dananghyan late tomorrow and I'll tell him about your concern. Keep to the protocol, John, and I'll see what I can find out. Here, you can give this book back to Deezee in the morning and I've got a translation for you to read." Anna handed the book and a manuscript of scanner printouts to him. "Interesting, but not too insightful. A beautiful lyrical style, whoever wrote it. Before the flare there were no cities, just villages of wooden structures, open fields and even orchards here. Angh is talked about as a physical presence among them, teaching, nurturing the young, advising a working council of males making day to day decisions for the Colanatrae. One male was sort of a mayor, elected to speak for the rest. Sound familiar?"

"Dananghyan," said John.

"Probably. We've no other contacts, and I can't get a word out of the servants. If it follows history, his word is the word of Angh, so he's a sort of priest as well."

"Deezee said Angh dwells in the House of Life," said John. "Could she be real?"

"Unlikely. It's easier to capture the minds of the people when a project is based on religious belief. Our own history is full of that, John, all the way back to the beginning. No, I think Dananghyan is number one here and we've got him going, now. Yumito presented his ideas today for using Colanatraen quartz fabrics and the metal products we can make

from their raw materials to build some domes over the cities here. Dananghyan's eyes lit up like new stars. With those domes, the Colanatrae could live like in the days described by your little book."

"The days of Angh," said John.

"He can tie it to religion. We're close to an agreement now. I'm sorry about whatever is wrong with Deeze, but don't do anything rash. We have to have those metals."

"I agree," said John, and really meant it.

He heard the tone of the crystal inside the room when he touched the door, but when he went inside she was not there in the light to greet him. "Deeze?" he said, and closed the door behind him.

"Is it time already, Jon-athon?" Her voice was weak, coming from a corner of the room in deep shadow. Her sleeping place.

"Yes it is. I'm a little late today. Are you all right, Deeze?"

"I feel so tired, Jon-athon, and will not be a good student today. Can you come back tomorrow, or the next day?"

"You're ill. I can tell by the sound of your voice. Has Dananghyan seen you this morning?"

"He was here earlier and will return soon. I feel so very warm and my mouth is dry. He brings me something to drink."

John stepped into the shadows without thinking, right up to her resting place, eyes quickly accommodating to low light.

He gasped, "Deeze, what is happening to you?" and fell to his knees at her side. She was lying naked on a sandstone slab contoured to fit her body. Even in weak light the gray skin glistened from her neck to her toes and along both arms, only her face and head as yet untouched.

"Hot," said Deeze feebly.

"I'll take care of it," said John. He got up and walked to the door as a servant entered carrying a quartz pitcher and goblet. "I'll take that," he said firmly, "and please bring Dananghyan here immediately! Deeze is ill!" The servant handed over the vessels and fled the room without answering.

He lifted her head and fed her water. The hair on the back of her head felt coarse, and it was the first time he had touched her. "It is better," she said, after draining two cups.

"You rest now until Dananghyan arrives. Oh, and I brought your book back. It's a beautiful story, Deeze. Now I understand the days of Angh you talk about." He held up the shiny book. "I'll leave it over by the window."

"No," said Deeze weakly. "The book is yours. I gave it to you. Please."

"It's a special book, Deeze. Are you sure?"

"Yes. You take book. I — I have another." She rolled her head to one side and closed her eyes.

Deeze

And Dananghyan came into the room.

John rushed to him, speaking in a near whisper. "She is ill. Why aren't you doing something for her?"

Dananghyan gave him a disdainful look. "There is nothing to be done. It is the will of Angh."

"She is burning with fever and her skin has a strange color. Surely you've seen something like this before. We have medical people with us. I could call someone to —"

"There is nothing to be done, except to make her more comfortable and prepare her for the House of Life. You must leave this room now."

John looked at him incredulously. "I am only concerned for my student and I'm sure we can help. Please let me —"

"— It is not your concern, but ours. Please leave."

Dananghyan nodded to a servant who opened the door to admit two others, grim-faced, ready to escort John from the room. Another entered, carrying a tray of bottles filled with colorful liquids, and a musky odor suddenly filled the room. He placed the tray by Deeze's bed and worked over it in shadow.

"Will you return tomorrow, Jon-athon?" asked Deeze in a faint voice, but before John could answer Dananghyan said, "There will be no tomorrow, Diezieranghyan. It is time."

"Oh," she said. John took a step towards her, but strong hands grasped his arm and steered him towards the doorway. "Must you leave now?" asked Deeze.

"It seems I'm being given no choice," said John, and the servants hauled him out of the room and down the narrow hallway until he had had enough, jerking his arms and bouncing both escorts off the walls. He jumped into the rover and drove furiously back to the barracks, sending up a plume of dirt as he ground to a stop. Anna opened the door as he jumped out of the rover, unprotected from sunlight, and stalked toward her.

"Good way to get blistered, John. Get inside, and we talk."

John pushed by her, banging the door against a wall. "Who do we have assigned as medic? Deeze needs medical attention!"

"Hold it, John, and calm down right now before you do even more damage! Yumito was there with Dananghyan, says you were acting juvenile and roughing up servants when there's nothing we can do. Dananghyan is displeased, and you're forbidden from going up there again, do you understand?"

"Deeze is ill, and they're doing nothing about it. We must —"

"Deeze is dying, John. I'm sorry. It's a condition peculiar to the females and probably explains why there are so few of them. It's fast and it's always fatal."

"Says who? Dananghyan? And since when is it *not* part of my job to be concerned about the well-being

of my students?"

Anna put a hand on his shoulder. "I'm really sorry about this, John, but it's my fault. I didn't anticipate the possibility you would become so attached to her, and I should have known better. Dananghyan's in charge, and he says Deeze will be gone by morning. We have to accept that."

John sat in a chair and put his head in his hands, mind racing, looking for an avenue, finding nothing. Anna went about her business, passing occasionally to pat him on the shoulder and give him a sympathetic look. He sat at a table and drank tea, foot tapping, until Anna left the barracks and he heard the roar of a rover. He looked outside. His rover was still there, now in shade. He got in, turned the engine on and pulled slowly, quietly away from the barracks. The city was desolate at mid-day. He entered west of the spoke leading to Dananghyan's dwelling and drove towards the House of Life looming above the skyline. Parked in shade a hundred yards from the window behind which he had spent his time with Deeze for the past six months.

In two hours it was stifling in the rover. In four it was unbearable. He got out, stood in the shade. Across the street a child watched him from a window, then disappeared. A boy, red-robed, hair cut flat to the scalp, unlike the short but bushy style that Deeze favored. He remembered the wiry feel of her hair. He remembered her eyes, her voice.

And then, near dusk, he saw the procession stream out of Dananghyan's dwelling.

Six red-robed servants, carrying a bier on which lay a figure wrapped in quartz fabric, only the head exposed. Dananghyan walked respectfully behind them, looking over one shoulder in John's direction as they turned a corner and headed towards the House of Life — and Death.

John jumped into the rover and cranked the engine hard, skidding around a corner and sprinting down the street to another. The procession was nearing the House of Life, wide double-doors opening to receive it. He gunned the engine and the rover leaped forward, heading towards the doors. Heads turned as they heard the engine. The servants carrying Deeze were trotting now, bouncing their little burden as Dananghyan turned around defiantly, hands on hips.

That's when John saw the other rover, and the angry-looking woman stalking towards him. Anna. He braked to a stop, just short of running her down, and started to get out.

"Get out of here, John, right now!" Anna's face was a menacing mask of wide eyes and clenched teeth. She spoke to him nose to nose, spitting on him. "She's gone, John, and Dananghyan doesn't want you here. You get back in that rover and get moving or I promise you will be off-planet for good within the hour. Got it?"

He started to say something, but the big doors were closing. The red-robed procession and the bier were inside, out of sight, and the doors shut with a loud snap. He climbed into the rover and slammed the door shut as Anna stepped away. The drive back to the barracks was a misty experience in numbing anger and sorrow. He took a trunk, gulped tea, and locked himself into his cubicle. Anna came to his door twice that night, knocking softly, then going away when there was no answer from the darkness engulfing him. Shortly before he fell into an exhausted sleep, John Winkle had one final, cruel revelation. He had forgotten about the book Deeze had given him, and had left it in her room.

Anna assigned him to plant inventory at one of the several hydroponic farms a mile outside the city. He was the only human there and kept to himself, rising early and working until well after dark, filling out survey sheets the team had prepared for him. The work was dull and mindless, but useful to the team and justifying his continued presence on planet. There were hard hours when he considered the loss of Deeze, and Myrae, the destruction of a promising career because he had cared too much for one of them, violating the trust Anna had given him. Nightly, he stood outside to watch the ship, his real home, pass overhead, a bright star in a moonless sky. On board that great city-ship his grandparents, parents, and two brothers, along with thousands of others, were going about their everyday lives in a world that had traveled twenty centuries since leaving Browne's planet. Alone and desolate, he felt despair as the moving star would disappear over the horizon, signaling him to return to his little room for a short night of fitful sleep with dreams unremembered and a new morning of quiet depression and boredom.

But on the evening of his fortieth day at the farm, Anna came for him.

He was sitting outside, a cup of tea in one hand. The headlights of the rover blinded him and he was showered with dirt as she braked to a stop and pushed the passenger door open. "Get in, John, and no arguments. I'm taking you to a personal audience in the House of Life."

"I don't understand," he said, astonished.

"Neither do I," said Anna. "The invitation is directly from Dananghyan, and it's our first chance to get into that place. Come on, get in."

He complied, and the rover jerked forward before he had the door shut. "Maybe he wants to mend some fences, John. Try to control your feelings and be polite to him. He wants what we can give him and this could be our big night. It'll be in your hands and quite frankly that scares the hell out of me, but when I suggested other names he wouldn't consider them. It's always the will of Angh with him, so it has

to be you."

Anna swerved to avoid hitting two Colanatrae on a spoke at the edge of the city, but never slowed. "You know what we want, so just play it by ear. You okay with that?"

"Yes," said John, still stunned.

When they arrived at the House of Life the doors were open, spilling forth orange light. Red-robed servants entered carrying sprigs of herbs and produce from the farms and small bottles, leaving empty-handed. Dananghyan was waiting in the doorway, nodding silently but respectfully as John approached him. He turned and John followed him inside, staring at the guardian's back, noticing at first only the way the servants parted for them until the doors creaked closed at his back. And then he looked up —

— An atrium reaching to the very top of the dome bracketed by four levels of slabs connected by open staircases curving up the walls. Oil lamps were fixed at each level and along the walls, flickering dully, the air heavy with the scent of aerosols and herbs.

In the center of the vast ground floor stood a massive block of sandstone, painted on one side with the winged symbol of Angh, around which servants had laid armfuls of fresh food and herbs, and on top of the block lay the quartz-enshrouded figure of a female old beyond description. John stopped there, heart pounding. Bone glistened beneath transparent, shriveled skin, eyes closed peacefully in death. He looked at Dananghyan, who only beckoned John to follow him.

They made a terrifying ascent of narrow stairs worn smooth by millions of footsteps, John keeping one shoulder in contact with the curving walls. On each floor they came to rooms, doors closed, and on the second level a servant came by with a flask of yellow liquid, climbing ahead of them. On the third level he distinctly heard the sound of a crying infant, a door ajar to a dimly lit room where row after row of fist-sized translucent spheres filled with new Colanatraen life floated in liquid-filled trays of quartz. The air was hot and humid and his heart thudded from the sight of the nursery and the long climb until they finally reached the fourth level, where he took one dizzying look at the shrouded figure hundreds of feet below him. They were at the top of the dome, and in front of them was a single, curving room with a massive door of silver metal covered with a hammered intaglio of the image of Angh. Dananghyan went to the door, which opened at his touch as a servant exited, the one who had passed them with the flask. Now empty-handed, he brushed past John with downcast eyes. Dananghyan beckoned John to enter. "You are expected," he said softly, and stepped aside.

John found himself alone in a somehow familiar room as Dananghyan closed the door behind him.

Deezee

Simple furnishings: sandstone block table and seats, rows of books in niches along the walls, a step up to a sleeping area to his right. No windows, light coming from a single lamp on the table. Something twinkled there. He looked around nervously, walked to the table and swallowed hard at what he saw. Deezee's book, the one she had given him. He touched it, ran a finger over the polished cover, the figure of Angh.

"It is your property, I believe."

John gasped. The voice had come from the darkened sleeping area. Female. He took the book in both hands, squinted into the gloom and saw movement.

"I am pleased you have come, for I have need of your services. Please seat yourself and have something to drink, a special blend of juices in celebration of new life. It is a gift of my citizens, to nurture the process within me through which they spring forth. I am Angh, the bringer of life, the mother of all. Drink with me."

When she came into the light, body a curving shadow beneath her quartz gown, the first thing he saw were the delicately veined diaphanous wings spreading to her sides and above her head.

The second thing he saw was her face.

Her familiar face.

She walked sedately to the table, poured two cups of juice for them and drank hers quickly. "The one who has gone before me leaves with the thanks of a thousand offspring, but perhaps my progeny can look forward to a better life with the aid of our human friends. I must learn of these new cities you would build for us, and other things as well. Would you instruct me, within the confines of this room? It will take much of your time."

"You know I will," said John, clutching his book with one hand.

"And when you have answered my questions, I will answer yours if you do not fly away from me too quickly," she said, smiling.

"Many of my questions have been answered," said John, his heart singing, "but there are many, many more. Here is the first: what should I call you?"

She cocked her head to one side. "What is your wish, Jon-athon?"

"I would like to call you Deezee, in the privacy of this room."

"Then let it be so," she said with finality.

"It is the will of Angh." □

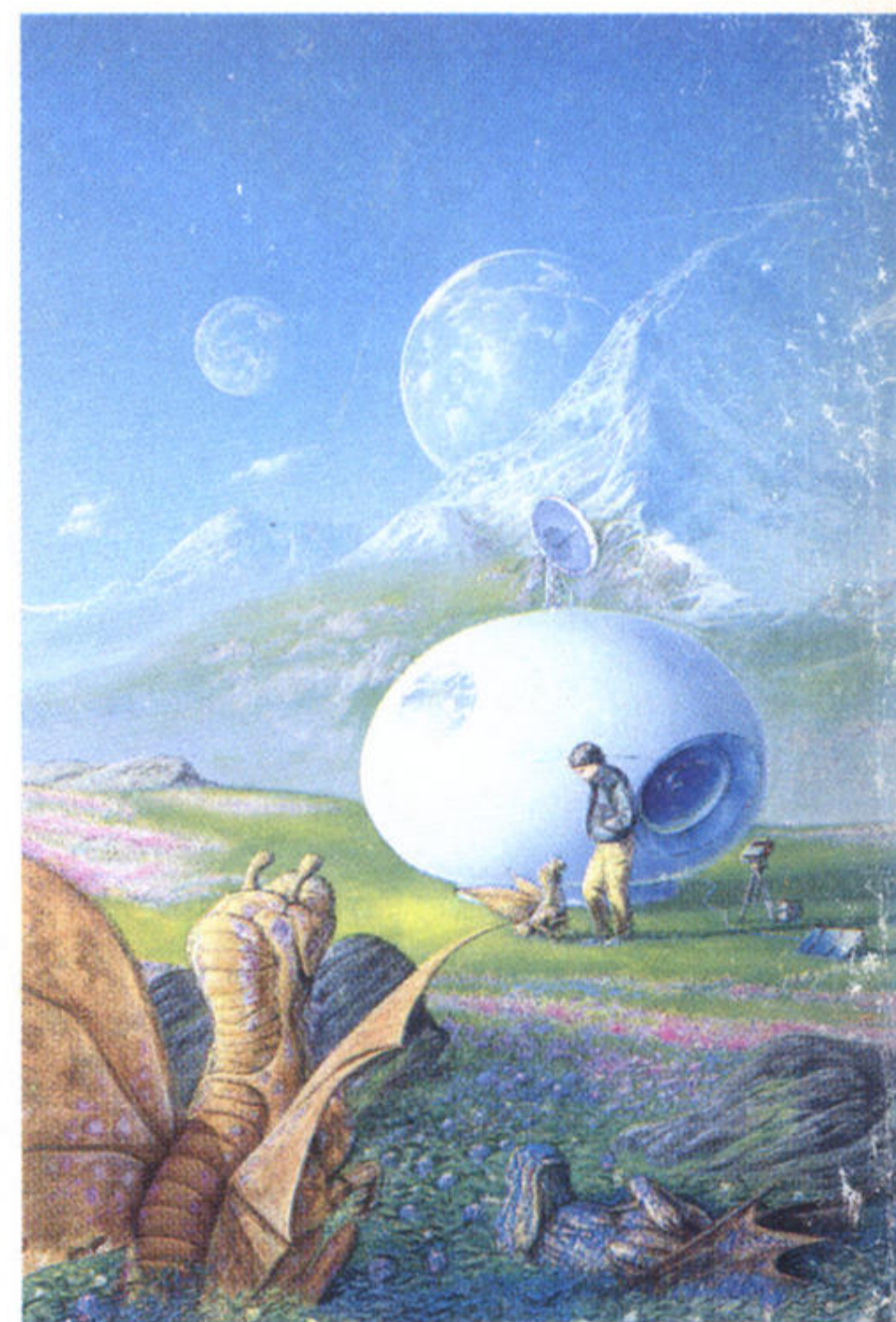
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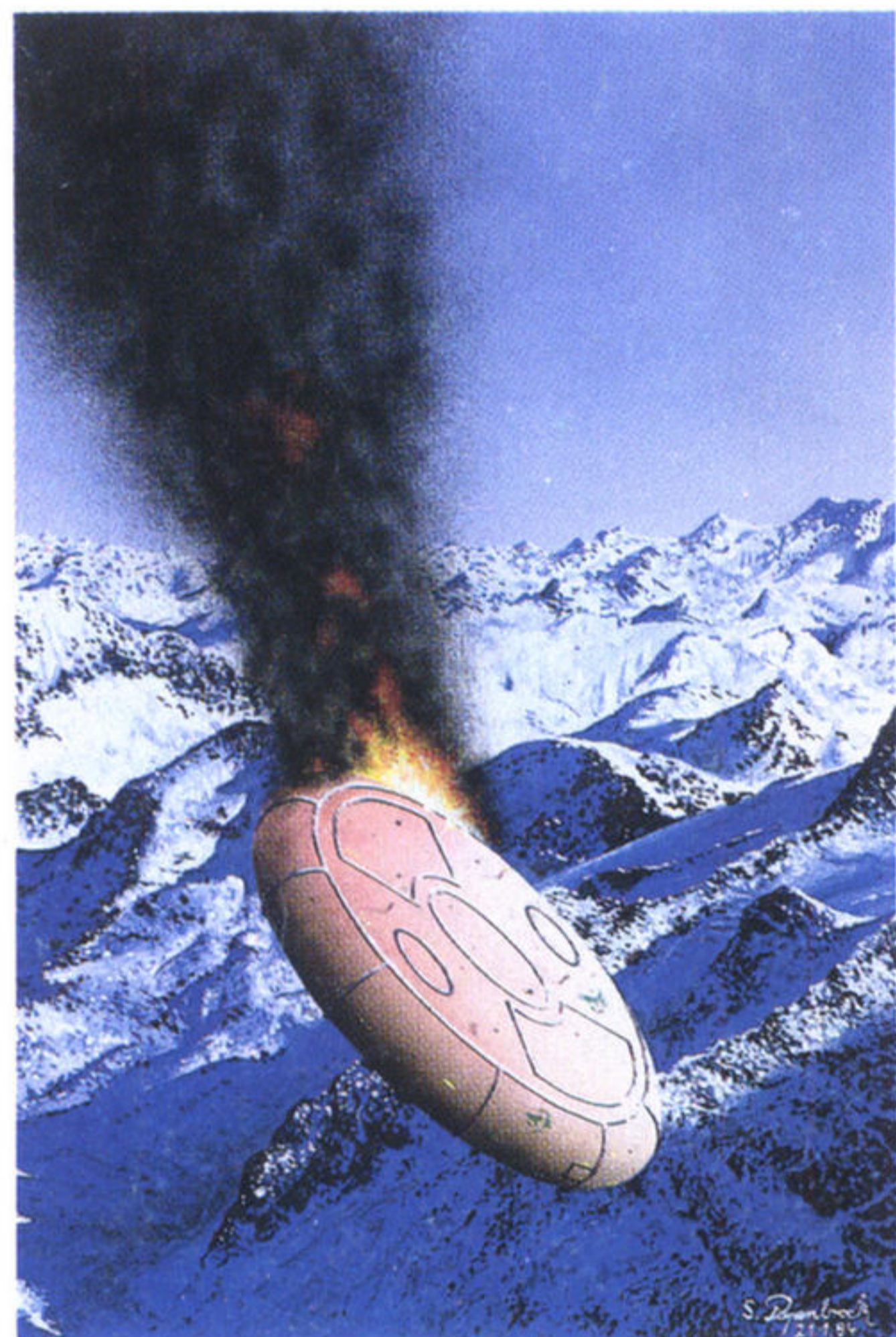
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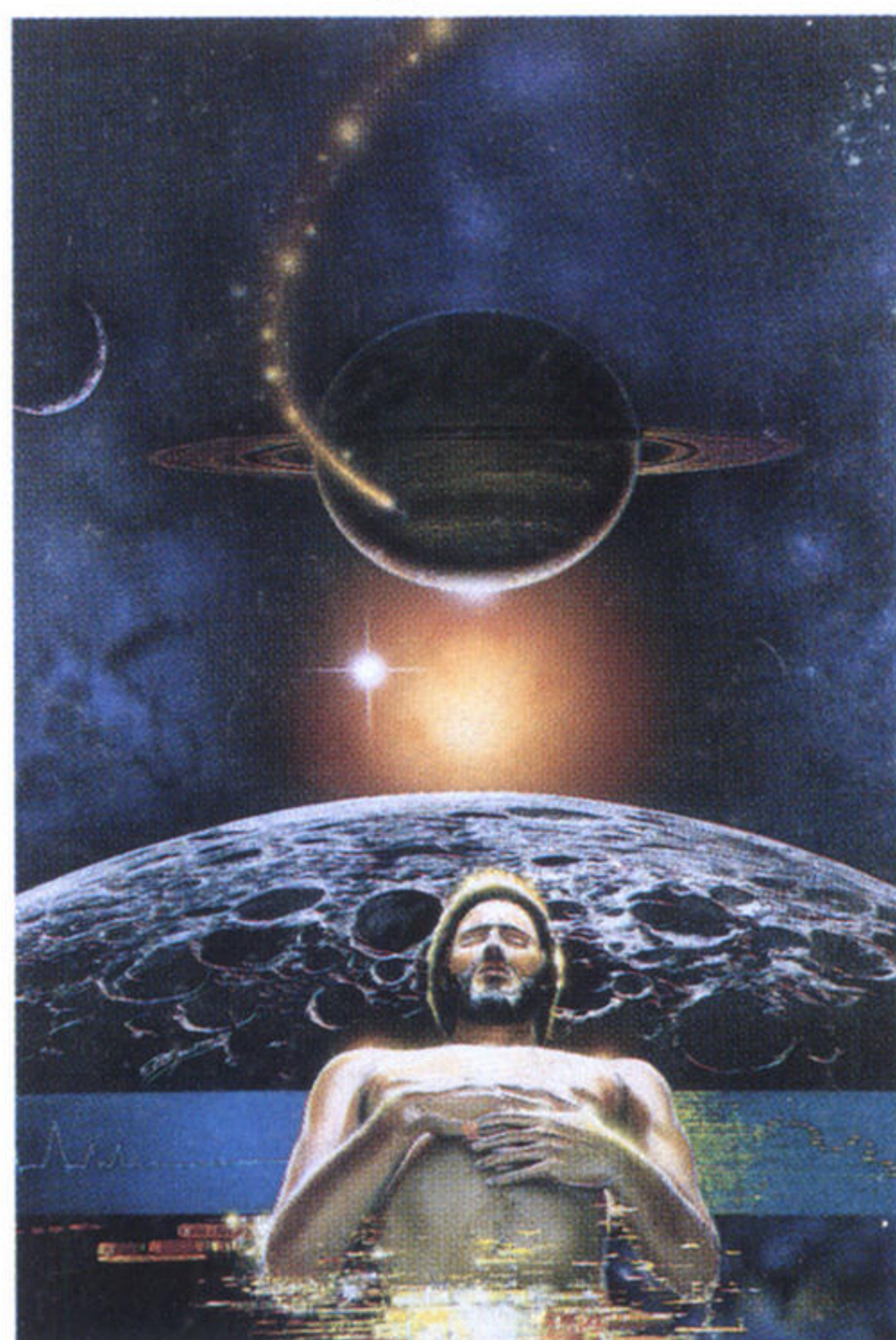
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